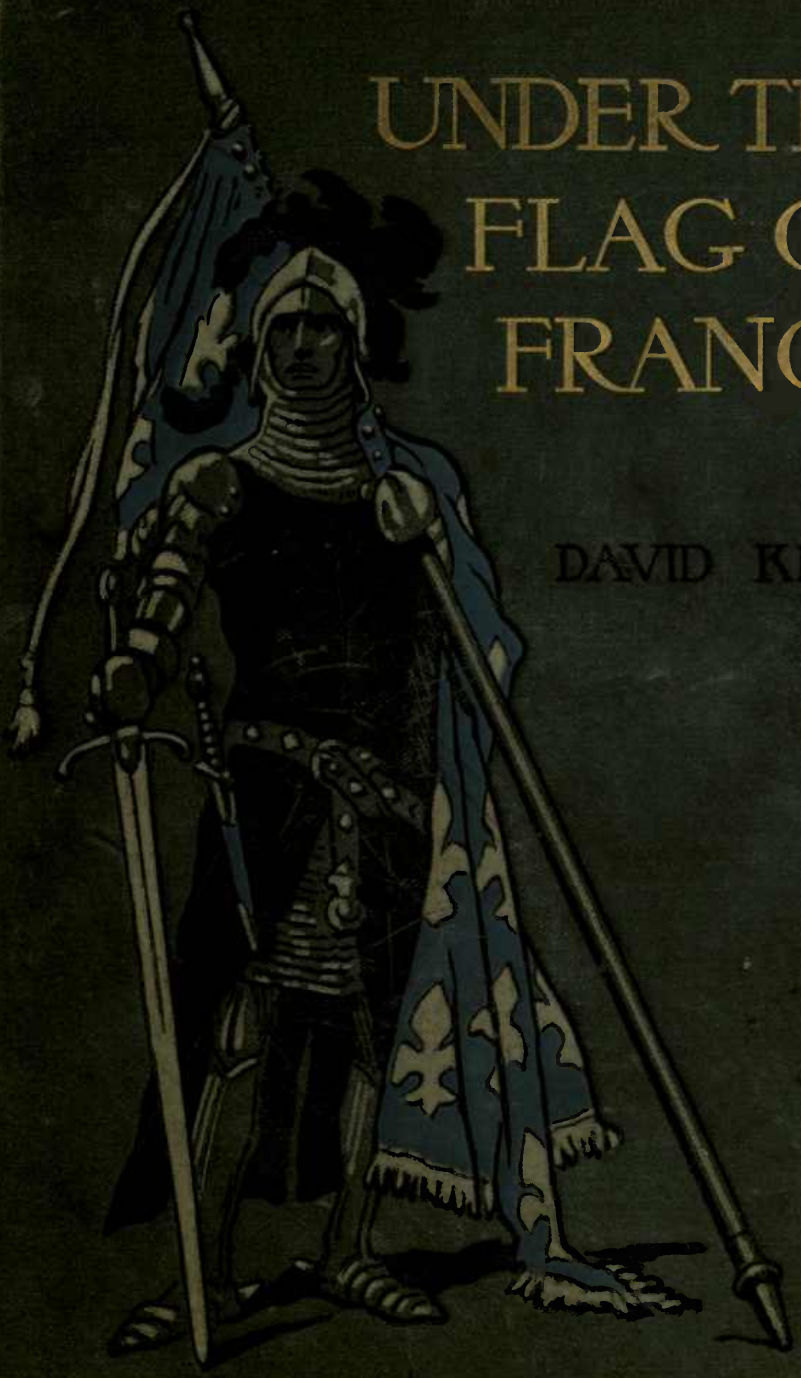
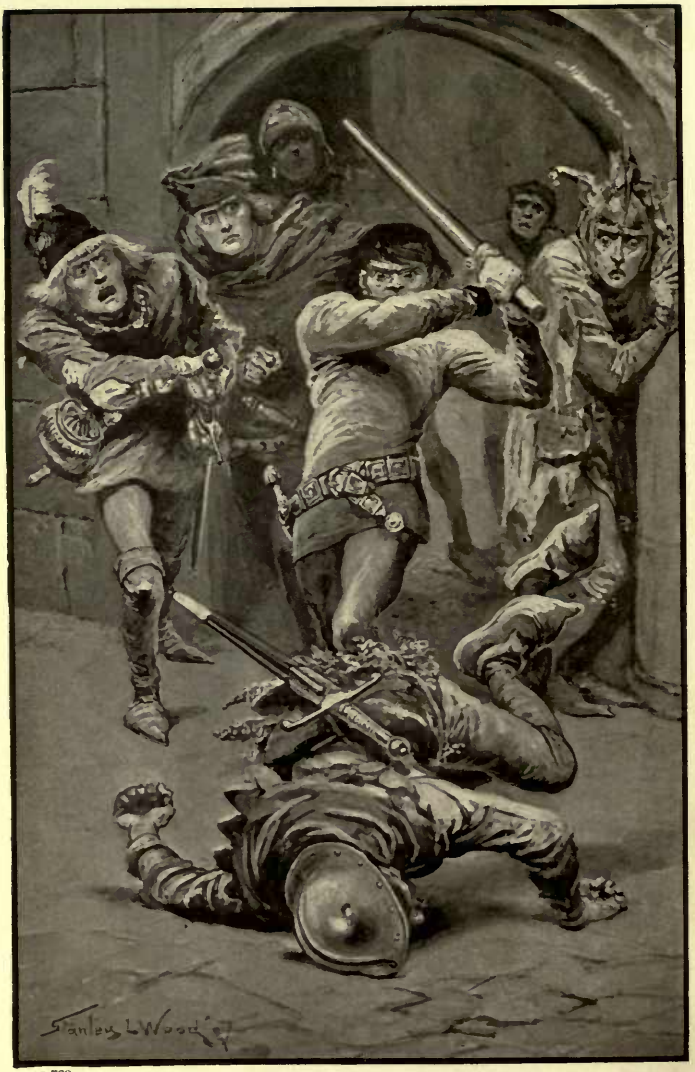
UNDER THE FLAG OF FRANCE



DAVID KER

Under the Flag of France



B 763

BERTRAND DEFENDS THE JESTER

Under the Flag of France

A Tale of Bertrand du Guesclin

BY

DAVID KER

Author of "Among the Dark Mountains," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY STANLEY L. WOOD

BLACKIE AND SON LIMITED

LONDON GLASGOW DUBLIN BOMBAY

1908

TO

MY NIECES

MARGARET AND MARY KER

THIS TALE

IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

2136633

PREFACE

I MUST plead guilty to having, for the purposes of the story, placed my hero's castle (which unhappily no longer exists) much nearer to Rennes than it actually was; but the chief events of his life are given here very much as I found them in the old French chronicles.

DAVID KER.

CONTENTS

Chap.		Page
I.	The Broken Bough	1
II.	Facing a Monster	7
III.	A Mysterious Message	16
IV.	Bertrand's Dream	29
V.	A Timely Rescue	37
VI.	Mighty to strike	51
VII.	A Strange Tale	67
VIII.	Lance to Lance	79
IX.	Into the Dragon's Jaws	93
X.	The Wages of Judas	103
XI.	A Midnight Battle	110
XII.	Crowning an Enemy	126
XIII.	A Red Stain	133
XIV.	The Black Death	140
XV.	A Night Alarm	148
XVI.	The Boldest Deed of all	161
XVII.	The Haunted Circle	168

Chap.		Page
XVIII.	A Phantom Warrior	177
XIX.	In a Robber Camp	189
XX.	Doomed	194
XXI.	The Black Wolf	206
XXII.	A Clever Stratagem	215
XXIII.	Possessed Swine	222
XXIV.	Through the Darkness	235
XXV.	A Case of Conscience	246
XXVI.	Crescent and Cross	259
XXVII.	An Astounding Revelation	268
XXVIII.	Plot and Counter-plot	276
XXIX.	Treachery	283
XXX.	A Village Festival	299
XXXI.	A Strange Meeting	313
XXXII.	News of an Old Friend	326
XXXIII.	The Last Sunset	337

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
BERTRAND DEFENDS THE JESTER . . . . *Frontispiece*	61
BERTRAND GRAPPLES WITH THE WOLF	9
THE BLACK CHAMPION CONQUERS	88
"THE BLACK KNIGHT TURNED LIKE A HUNTED LION" .	163
"THE SHOUTING ASSAILANTS BURST IN"	220
"HE STARED AT HIS FOE'S REVEALED FACE"	266

CHAPTER I

The Broken Bough

"WHAT place is there for me on the earth? I would I were dead!"

Startling words, in truth, to hear from any one's lips; and doubly so from those of a boy of fourteen, with his whole life before him.

It was a clear, bright evening in the spring of 1334, and the setting sun was pouring a flood of golden glory over the wooded ridges, and dark moors, and wide green meadows, and quaint little villages of Bretagne, or Brittany, then a semi-independent principality ruled by its own duke, and little foreseeing that, barely two centuries later, it was to be united to France once for all.

Over earth and sky brooded a deep, dreamy stillness of perfect repose, broken only by the lowing of cattle from the distant pastures, and the soft, sweet chime of the vesper-bell from the unseen church tower, hidden by the still uncleared wood, through one solitary gap in which were seen the massive grey battlements of Motte-Brun Castle, the residence of the local "seigneur," or lord of the

manor. A rabbit sat upright in its burrow to clean its furry face. A squirrel, halfway up the pillar-like stem of a tall tree, paused a moment to look down with its small, bright, restless eye; and a tiny bird, perched on a bough above, broke forth in a blithe carol.

But the soothing influence of this universal peace brought no calm to the excited lad who was striding up and down a small open space in the heart of the wood, stamping fiercely ever and anon, and muttering, half aloud, words that seemed less like any connected utterance than like the almost unconscious bursting forth of thoughts too torturing to be controlled.

"Is it my blame that I was born thus ill-favoured? Yet mine own father and mother gloom upon me and shrink away from me as from one under ban of holy Church, or taken red-handed in mortal sin. What have I done that mine own kith and kin should deal with me as with a leper?"

In calling himself ill-favoured, the poor boy had only spoken the truth; for the features lighted up by the sinking sun, as he turned his face toward it, were hideous enough for one of the demons with which these woods were still peopled by native superstition.

His head was unnaturally large, and covered with coarse, black, bristly hair, which, worn long according to the custom of all men of good birth in that age, tossed loosely over his huge round

shoulders like a bison's mane. His light-green eyes, small and fierce as those of a snake, looked out from beneath a low, slanting forehead garnished with bushy black eyebrows, which were bent just then in a frown as dark as a thunder-cloud. His nose was so flat that it almost seemed to turn inward, and its wide nostrils gaped like the yawning gargoyles of a cathedral. His large, coarse mouth, the heavy jaw of which was worthy of a bulldog, was filled with strong, sharp teeth, which, as he gnashed them in a burst of rage, sent a sudden flash of white across his swarthy face like lightning in a moonless sky.

His figure was quite as strange as his face. Low of stature and clumsily built, his vast and almost unnatural breadth of shoulder and depth of chest gave him the squat, dwarfish form assigned by popular belief to the deformed "Dwergar" (earth-dwarfs) who then figured prominently in the legends of all Western Europe. His length of arm was so great that his hands reached below his knees, while his lower limbs seemed as much too short as his arms were too long. In a word, had a half-grown black bear been set on its hind legs, and arrayed in the rich dress of a fourteenth-century noble, it would have looked just like this strange boy.

All at once the excited lad stopped short in his restless pacing, and, as if feeling the need of venting in some violent bodily exertion the frenzy that

boiled within him, snatched from its sheath his only weapon (a broad-bladed hunting-knife, half cutlass and half dirk), and with one slash cut half through the thickest part of a large bough just over his head.

His arm was raised to repeat the blow and sever the branch entirely, when a new thought struck him, and, flinging down his weapon, he seized the bough with both hands, and threw his whole strength into a tug that seemed capable of dislodging not merely the branch, but the tree itself.

The tough wood quivered, cracked, and gave way, and a second effort—which hung the boy-athlete's low, broad forehead with beads of moisture, and made the veins of his strong hands stand out like cords—wrenched the bough away altogether.

For a moment the young champion's harsh but striking features brightened into a smile of joyful pride, natural enough to one who felt that he possessed surpassing bodily strength in an age when bodily strength and prowess were the most valued of all qualities. But the smile faded instantly, and the sullen gloom settled down on his dark face again, more heavily than before.

"Methinks yon gay cousins of mine," muttered he, with a grim laugh, "would be hard put to it to do the like, though they call me dwarf and lubbard, and look askance at me as if I were a viper or a toad. I feel, in truth, that though I am

not one to wear the dainty trappings of a court-gallant and bask in ladies' smiles, I have it in me to approve myself a tried man-at-arms on a stricken field, and make my name dreaded by the foes of my country and liege-lord. But what avails it, if I may never find a chance to show what I can do?"

At that very moment, as if in direct answer to the bitter query that the fiery youth had unconsciously spoken aloud, a clear, sweet voice rose from amid the clustering leaves, singing as follows:—

"The knight rode forth on his dapple-grey steed
Thro' the sunshine of early morn;
And he was aware of a cry of woe
To his ear by the breezes borne.

"He turned his eye to the miry slough
That ran beside his way,
And he was aware of a leper man
Half-sunk in the mire that lay.

"His fingers were parting joint from joint,
His skin was yellow as corn;
More countless the sores in his rotting flesh
Than buds on the milk-white thorn.

"His hairless head was as bare and white
As the boughs of a blasted tree;
A fouler sight than that leper-man
No mortal eye could see.

"'For Christ's dear sake, Sir Knight,' quoth he,
'I pray thee reach thine hand,
And draw me forth, or ere I sink,
Unto the firmer land.'

"Nor quailed nor wavered that valiant knight;
'For Christ's dear sake let it be!'
And out he reached his strong right hand,
And the leper-man forth drew he.

"Then the leper-man's face grew bright as the sun
When he smiles on the earth at morn;
And his voice was soft as the summer breeze
That stirs the ripening corn.

"And the knight, who had bowed not for prince or peer,
Bent low as to holy rood,
For well he wist 'twas our Lord Himself
Who there before him stood.

"'I give thee My blessing,' our Saviour said,
As the warrior bowed his knee;
'What thou didst to the poor and outcast man,
Thou hast done it unto Me.

"'Henceforth shall men call thee My chosen knight,
And best of all knights alive;
And all that thou doest from this day forth,
Whate'er it be, shall thrive.

"'For dearer to Heaven is one pitying word
Than rich minsters or abbey-lands broad;
And the path of kindness to suffering man
Is the nearest way to God!'"

CHAPTER II

Facing a Monster

As the song proceeded, the moody lad bent forward to listen with a visibly brightening face, though in an attitude of reverent awe; for his first thought was one that would have occurred to any man of that age in his place—that the voice he heard was that of his patron saint, or of an angel sent down from heaven to comfort him in his distress.

But ere he could utter the devout thanksgiving that rose to his lips, he was checked by the sudden appearance of the singer himself.

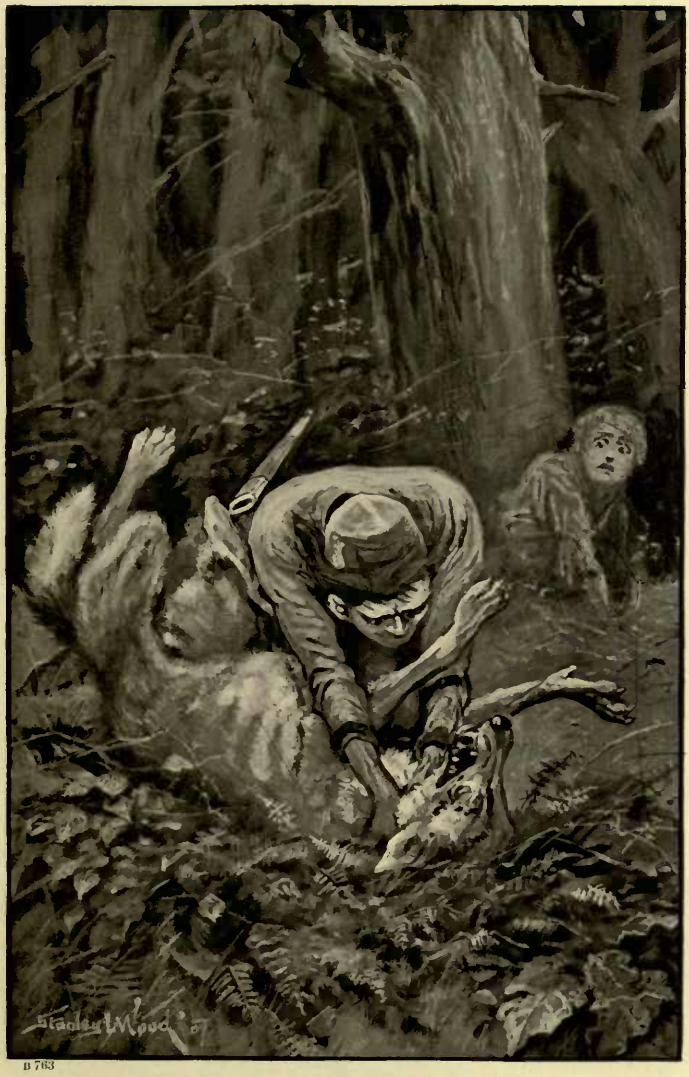
From the thickets issued a boy about his own age, with a huge faggot of dead wood on his back. He was barefooted and barelegged, and what little clothing he had was sorely tattered and soiled; but the wholesome brown of his tanned face, and the springy lightness of his step under that heavy burden, told that his rough life agreed with him. It was plain, however, from the wandering look of his eyes, and the bird-like restlessness of all his movements, that he was one of the poor half-witted creatures so numerous then in every part of France,

and pretty common even now in some remote parts of it.

At sight of the young noble (whose grim features had certainly nothing reassuring in them at the first glance) the simpleton came to a sudden halt, and looked not a little scared. Nor was this surprising; for so many and so tyrannical were the privileges claimed by the landed gentry in an age when all France was divided into beasts of prey called nobles and beasts of burden called peasants, that (though among the sturdy Bretons there was happily less of the frightful oppression that disgraced France proper) this poor lad could not tell that he might not have committed, by picking up these dry sticks in a wood that virtually belonged to no one, some offence rendering him liable to punishment; and punishment was no trifle in the fourteenth century, whether inflicted by the law or against it.

But ere a word could be spoken on either side, there came a sudden and startling interruption.

Fully occupied with his supposed enemy in front, the wood-boy knew nothing of the far worse peril that menaced him from the rear. He never heard, poor lad, the warning rustle in the thicket behind him, nor saw the hungry gleam of the cruel greenish-yellow eye that glared at him through the tangled boughs; but all at once came a crackle and crash of broken twigs—a fierce yell, a stifled cry, a heavy fall—and the forest-lad lay face downward



B 763

BERTRAND GRAPPLES WITH THE WOLF

on the earth, struggling beneath the weight of a huge grey wolf, ravenous from its winter fast!

Luckily for the poor boy, the furious beast was hampered for a moment by the projecting sticks of the huge fagot, on which its first rush had fallen. But an instant more would have seen the helpless lad fearfully mangled, if not killed outright, when, just as all seemed over, rescue came.

The moment the young noble caught sight of the springing monster, he looked round for the hunting-knife that he had flung down in the grass and ferns; but not finding it, he whirled up the broken bough like a flail, and dealt a crushing blow at the wolf's head with all his might and main.

Had that blow fallen as it was meant, the brute would never have moved again; but a quick jerk of the long, gaunt body foiled the stroke, which, missing its head, hit the fore paw and snapped the bone like a reed. With a sharp howl of pain, the savage beast let go its prey and flew at its enemy.

But that sullen, hard-featured lad was one whom no peril, no matter how sudden and terrific, ever found unprepared. Dropping his now useless club, he sprang upon the wolf in turn and fastened both hands on its lean, sinewy throat with a grip like a smith's vice.

And then began a terrible battle. Over and over rolled boy and beast, amid snapping twigs and flying dust, the boy throwing his whole force into the strangling clutch that he still maintained,

while the wolf's cruel fangs gnashed and snapped close to his throat, and its hot, foul breath came steaming in his face, and the blood-flecked foam from its gaping jaws hung upon his hair or fell in clammy flakes on his cheek.

Such a struggle, however, was too furious to last. Little by little the fire died out of the fierce yellow eyes—the wolfish yells sank into a low, gasping whine—the monster's frantic struggles grew fainter and fainter; the victory was all but won.

But the boy-champion, too, was almost spent with the terrific strain of this death-grapple, and his numbed fingers were already beginning to relax the iron grasp which they had so sternly made good till now. One moment more would have let loose the all-but-conquered enemy, and sealed the brave lad's doom; but just then came a flash of steel before his swimming eyes—a dull thud, like a tap on a padded door—a hoarse, gurgling gasp—and the wolf lay limp and dead on the trampled earth.

The half-witted boy, recovering from the first stun of his fall, had seen his rescuer's peril, and his keen eye had caught the glitter of the lost knife in the fern. To pounce on it, to snatch it up, to deal one sure thrust into the wolf's exposed side, was the work of a moment; but, quick as he was, he came only just in time.

"I thank thee, friend," said the young noble, with a quiet dignity far beyond his years, as he slowly rose to his feet. "St. Yves be my speed,

but yon blow of thine was as good a one as ever was stricken; and had it been one whit less swift or less sure, methinks it had gone hard with me. But how fares it with thee? Thou canst scarce have come off scatheless from the clutch of yon felon beast."

"I am unharmed, messire; praise be to God and the holy saints," said the other, respectfully. "I trow it is I who ought rather to thank your valiancy, since, but for your aid, my strength had availed nought against such a beast as this."

"A grim quarry, in good sooth," cried the boy-conqueror, scanning with admiring looks the slain wolf's sinewy limbs and mighty jaws; "but, be that as it may, neither man nor beast shall harm a defenceless boy while I can lift hand to stay it!"

"It is well spoken, fair son," said a grave, mild voice from behind; "and ever mayst thou buckler the weak against the strong, and beat down the ravening wolves that slaughter the flock of God!"

Both boys looked up with a start, and saw with surprise and secret awe that, although they had neither seen nor heard any one approach, they were no longer alone.

Beside them stood a tall, slim figure, clad in the grey frock and cowl of a monk, and protected from the flints and thorns of the rugged path only by a pair of torn and dusty sandals.

The stranger's arms and limbs, so far as his robe left them visible, seemed wasted almost to a

skeleton; and on the hollow face that looked forth from the shadowy cowl might be plainly read the traces of long hardship and bitter suffering, and of mental conflicts more exhausting than either. But on that worn face now rested the sweet and holy calmness of the peace that passeth all understanding. A kindly smile played on his thin, delicate lips, and his large, bright eyes were filled with the loving, pitying tenderness of a guardian angel, though through it pierced ever and anon a flash of keen and terrible discernment.

A child would have nestled trustfully to the owner of that face, even without knowing who he was; a ruffian or a traitor would have slunk away abashed at the first glimpse of it.

The stranger's soundless approach, his saintly aspect, and his sudden appearance at the very moment when the death-struggle ended in victory, bred in both lads a conviction which the beliefs of that age made quite natural, and which the boy-noble was not slow to utter aloud.

"Holy father," said he, with a low and almost timid bow, "art thou my patron saint, St. Yves of Bretagne? If so, I pray thee to accept mine unworthy thanks for thy timely aid."

"Give thy thanks to God, my son, not to the humblest of His servants," replied the stranger, in a clear, musical voice, "though, could my aid have profited thee, assuredly it should not have been lacking. No saint nor angel am I, but a poor brother

of the monastery of Notre Dame de Secours (Our Lady of Help) in the town of Dinan; and men call me Brother Michael."

Hardly had he spoken, when the forest-boy threw himself at his feet, and kissed his hand, crying joyfully—

"You are he, then, whom they call 'God's Pilgrim!' Give me your blessing, I pray, holy father, for men say that good follows your steps wherever you go."

"God grant the like may be said of us all!" said the monk, earnestly, as his pale, worn face lighted up with so bright and happy a smile that it fairly transfigured him for the moment. Then, laying his thin hand gently on the boy's bowed head, he blessed him fervently.

As the overjoyed simpleton shambled to his feet again, Brother Michael turned to the boy-noble, who was eyeing him with undisguised admiration; for he too had heard the fame of "God's Pilgrim," who went from place to place doing good, and fearing neither pestilence, war, famine, robbers, nor any other peril, if there was even a chance of helping and comforting his fellow-men.

"Son," said he, kindly, "I have told thee my name; wilt thou tell me thine?"

"Bertrand du Guesclin," replied the boy, in a tone of sullen dejection, which showed that he, at least, had no guess how soon the unknown name that he uttered so despondingly was to echo like a

roll of thunder through the length and breadth of Europe, and to be the symbol of all that was chivalrous and noble alike with friend and foe.

The monk started slightly, and stood silent for a moment or two, with knitted brow and compressed lips, as if trying hard to recall some half-forgotten association connected with the name that he had just heard.

"Give me thy hand," said he at last, in a strangely altered voice.

The future hero extended his broad, sinewy hand to the clasp of Michael's long, slender fingers; and the monk's deep, earnest eyes rested with a penetrating glance on those of young Du Guesclin, which, as they met his, remained fixed as if unable to turn away.

So the two stood gazing at each other without a word for some moments, while the young forester looked wonderingly on.

"Give glory to God, my son, for He hath destined thee to great honour," said the monk at last, with a solemn earnestness, which showed how deeply he felt the importance of the strange message that he was delivering. "The grace of Heaven hath vouchsafed to mine unworthy self the gift of reading in each face that I see the destiny of him who bears it; and I read in thine that God hath chosen thee to be the champion of this distressed land, and to save it from all its foes!"

To any man of that age, the voice of a Church-

man was as that of God; and Bertrand no more thought of doubting the monk's words than if they had come down to him from heaven. His heart bounded at the thought that he, the ill-favoured, the mocked, the despised—he, on whom his own parents looked down as a shame to them—should be chosen by Heaven itself for so glorious a task; and it was no disbelief, but sheer astonishment, that fettered his tongue when he tried to answer.

"*I* the champion of France?" said he at last, with a look and tone of joyful amazement.

"Thou and no other," said the monk, firmly. "Why look'st thou thus amazed? Is it not told in Holy Writ how the greatest king of God's chosen people was at the first but an unknown shepherd-lad, and how he too was despised by his own kin?"

"Ha! how know'st thou that, holy father?" cried Du Guesclin, starting.

"By the revelation of God," said Michael, solemnly. "Fare thee well, my son; be thou strong to do thine appointed work, and to curb thine own rebellious spirit; for he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. As for thee, my child," added he to the half-witted lad, who had watched this strange scene with ever-growing wonder, "come with me; I have somewhat to say to thee."

The wood-boy obeyed like a child; and the next moment boy and monk vanished amid the trees, while Bertrand remained standing like a statue on the spot where they had left him, deep in thought.

CHAPTER III

A Mysterious Message

THE sunset of that memorable evening, as it faded from the scene of the wolf-fight, sent its last rays streaming through the small, narrow, loophole-like window of a plainly furnished upper room in Motte-Brun Castle (which stood two miles away on the edge of the wood), lighting up the face and figure of a tall, stately, grey-bearded man of middle age—whose plumed cap and rich dress showed him to be a noble—as he paced restlessly to and fro.

He was still strong and active for his years, and so markedly handsome that no one could guess him to have the unenviable renown of being father to the ugliest lad in Brittany. Yet such was the case, for this man was the Seigneur Du Guesclin himself, the lord of Motte-Brun.

The temper of a feudal lord of that age was usually anything but sweet; and Messire Yvon du Guesclin thought nothing of flinging a knife at his son or wife in the middle of dinner, or knocking out the teeth of some unlucky vassal with his sword-hilt. But, on this particular evening, his

bent brows, his short, fierce step, and the very strong language that came growling through his set teeth, told that he was in an even worse temper than usual, or (as an observant man-at-arms of his poetically said) "as ill at ease as a fat friar in Lent."

For this ill-humour, however, there was really some excuse. In the first place, Sir Yvon's bandaged right arm showed that he was, for the present at least, disabled from taking part in the constant fights which were then so recognizedly the chief amusement of a gentleman, that when no foes were to be had, men would fight their friends just to keep their hand in. Secondly, he seemed likely to be kept waiting for dinner (no trifle to the fourteenth-century barons, who had the appetite of other wild beasts as well as their ferocity), for his wife, Lady Euphrasie du Guesclin, had not yet returned from her afternoon visit to a neighbouring convent; and though (like most gentlemen of that "chivalrous" age) the good knight would have had no scruple about laying his whip lustily over the shoulders of his lady-wife when she happened to displease him, he would never have dreamed of offering her such an affront as sitting down to dinner without her.

But the worthy knight's third cause of complaint was of a higher and more lasting kind.

Rumours had long been afloat (vague and doubtful at first, but growing ever clearer and

more defined) of an impending breach between France and England, and a renewal of that never-ending conflict which seemed to have become the recognized state of things betwixt the two warlike races. When the war did break out, the Duke of Brittany, as one of the great vassals of the French crown, must, of course, take the field for the King of France with all his Breton knights and nobles, among whom Sir Yvon du Guesclin, the representative of one of the oldest families in the Duchy, must appear with a meagre train of but thirty men-at-arms, instead of the five hundred spears that had followed his more fortunate ancestors.

Never had the stout old warrior so bitterly regretted the poverty and decay of his once formidable house; and a yet keener pang shot through his bold heart as he looked down into the courtyard from the balconied platform of the bartizan, and saw his three stalwart nephews trying their strength with blunted swords, amid the applauding murmurs of a ring of watching men-at-arms.

"Would to Heaven," muttered the sturdy baron, clenching his unwounded hand till the knuckles grew white, "that yon brave lads were indeed mine; so should our ancient name be worthily represented. Of what sin have I been guilty, that Heaven should thus mock my prayers by giving me this black-avised abortion for my only son?"

This idea had been often in Sir Yvon's mind (if,

indeed, it could be said to be ever out of it) since he had given a home, a few years before, to his three orphan nephews, whose own home had been destroyed in one of the merciless wars of those "good old times." All the old knight's friends fully expected him to adopt one of the three as his son, and disinherit the unsightly Bertrand; and probably it was only the consciousness that it *was* so universally expected, which, acting on his native Breton obstinacy, kept him from doing it at once.

"Yonder comes my lagging dame at last," growled the baron, as several riders issued from the wood, with a female figure in their midst; "and methinks she is in as great haste for the even-meat as I, for she rideth as if for a wager! If any churl hath dared to molest her——"

And, with a black frown on his face, the old warrior hurried down the narrow, winding stair to meet his lady's return.

He had plenty of time to reach the inner gate ere she entered it; for in those days the admission of a lady to her own house, after even the shortest excursion outside the walls, was a work of no small time and trouble. To begin with, it was out of the question for her to venture forth at all without at least a dozen well-armed attendants clattering at her heels; and when she and her train returned, drawbridge must fall, and bolt and bar go grating back, ere she could enter her own home.

At the first glimpse of his wife's face, as he stepped forward to aid her to dismount, the Sire du Guesclin started in spite of himself. What could it be that had broken the habitual melancholy of that sad though still beautiful face with the dawn of a new and exciting hope? So might some prisoner look, who, doomed for life to a gloomy dungeon, should be told, after long years of weary captivity, that he was a free man once more.

"Husband—husband—I have heard——" she began brokenly, and then stopped, as if unable to say more.

"What hast thou heard, dame?" cried the old baron. "No ill news, I trust?"

"No, no! joyful news; great good news of our poor Bertrand!"

"Good of *him?*" growled Bertrand's father, with a scornful laugh. "When a kite becomes an eagle, then may he prove worthy of our name!"

Four centuries later, the father of another great man was as hard of belief in any good coming of his "disgrace to the family." When he heard that his despised son had achieved a feat that filled the whole world with his renown, and changed the history of a mighty empire, his sole comment was to growl, "The booby has got something in him after all!" For the world is ever slow to recognize its greatest; and he who told the tale of the "Ugly Duckling" that grew into a swan, might

have found an apt illustration of it, either in Bertrand du Guesclin or in Robert Clive.

"Nay, take it not amiss, sweetheart," cried Sir Yvon, softening his harsh tones as he saw his lady's face cloud at finding her great news so ill received. "Go, busk thee speedily for supper, and over the good cheer I will hear thy tale; for if it be ill talk 'twixt a full man and a fasting, 'twixt two fasting folks it must be even worse."

Then turning to his attendants, he shouted, with the full might of a voice that made the whole castle echo—

"Ho, there! bid the knave cooks be speedy, or their skins shall smart!"

The terrified cooks knew well that this was no idle threat, and bestirred themselves so briskly that ere Lady Euphrasie had completed her toilet, the evening meal was smoking on the board.

This baronial dining-room would have greatly startled any householder of our time; for in this primitive stronghold (where the refinements that had begun to make their way in England were still unknown) the lord and lady of the castle dined in the same hall and at the same table with the soldiers of their garrison, the only difference being that the latter sat at the lower end. The ponderous rafters were literally coated with soot by the smoke, which seemed to go everywhere but up the chimney; and the rotting rushes that strewed the stone floor were crusted with mud from scores

of booted feet, and littered with the bones flung to the big, hairy wolf-hounds that lay round the huge fire. The harsh voices and coarse oaths of the men-at-arms were plainly audible at the upper end of the board; and the torches that crackled and sputtered in iron cressets along the wall (adding their contribution of smoke to that which already filled the hall), kept quivering and flaring in the night-wind that whistled through the glassless windows.

In a word, the dirtiest and noisiest London tavern of our day would compare favourably, both in cleanliness and comfort, with the dining-hall of this high-born gentleman of the good old times.

"Now, dame," said Sir Yvon at last, through a huge mouthful of roast beef, "let us hear this news of thine."

And the lady, instinctively lowering her voice, began thus—

"The vesper-bell had not ceased when I drew bridle at the convent gate, and I went into the chapel to join my prayers with those of the holy sisters; and when prayers were over, my cousin, the Abbess, would fain have me tarry for the evening meal. But to that I said nay, for I knew thou wouldest be watching for my return."

A kindly look thanked her from the old castellan's keen eyes.

"But I thought it ill to depart without visiting

Sister Agnes, the holiest of them all; and I craved such comfort as she could best bestow, for my heart was exceeding heavy. So I hied me up to her cell in the rock."

Here she paused a moment, while her three nephews (who sat a little below her, in order of age) bent forward in silent attention. None of the three, however, ventured to speak, for in that age it would have been the worst possible presumption for any young man (especially if not yet made a knight) to join unasked in the talk of his elders; and the youths had seen enough of their good uncle's surprising readiness with his hands in such cases, to find in it an effectual curb to their natural forwardness.

"Ere I passed the threshold," went on the lady, "she called me by name, and bade me enter. As I did so, she rose from her stony seat, and took me by the hand (the like did she not for the Duchess of Brittany herself) and said, more blithely than she was ever wont to speak, 'Welcome, thou favoured of Heaven! I am sent unto thee with glad tidings. Go tell thy lord to cease his murmuring against God for sending him a son like Bertrand; for lo! that same Bertrand shall yet be the glory of his house, and of the whole realm of France!"

"What? what?" cried the baron, excitedly; "said she, 'the whole realm of France'?"

"That did she," said his wife, in a voice trembling with emotion; "those were her very words!"

The hearers exchanged looks of speechless amazement.

"And as she spake—whether it was but the echoes that answered her, or a choir of unseen angels sent to guard the holy place—methought I heard many voices repeat her words: 'The glory of his house, and of the whole realm of France!'"

She ceased, and hid her face in her hands as if overcome by emotion.

Such prophecies were then matter of implicit faith; and those of Sister Agnes, in particular, were famed through all Brittany for their exact and often immediate fulfilment. Hence neither Bertrand's scornful father, his desponding mother, nor his sneering cousins (utterly astounded though they all were by this prediction) had a doubt that this clumsy, ill-favoured lad of whom they were so ashamed was destined to rise above them all; but how, no one could imagine.

But ere any one could speak, a clamour of voices was heard outside, and a hurried trampling of feet.

"Ha!" cried the old baron, frowning, "who dares make such ado in *my* castle? By St. Yves of Bretagne, I will take some order with these roisterers, be they who they may!"

But as he sprang up to make good his threat, the hall door flew open, and in came the grey-haired gate-porter.

"Woe is me, my lord, that I should bring you

evil tidings! A woodman hath come hither but now, having found in the forest Messire Bertrand's hunting-knife lying by a slain wolf; but of my young lord himself saw he nought!"

"Oh, my son, my son!" wailed Lady Euphrasie, whose motherly heart awoke too late.

"Peace with thy whining, wench!" said her husband, angrily; "this is no time for tears and cries. Where is this woodman, fellow? Bring him hither straightway."

A moment later a sturdy peasant, in soiled leather jerkin and leggings, slouched bashfully into the hall, and, bowing awkwardly to his lord, laid at the latter's feet the well-known hunting-knife and the dead wolf, at whose huge carcass the old Du Guesclin (a sportsman to his very finger-tips) looked admiringly, even in the height of his anxiety and grief.

"If the boy hath done such a deed unaided, he is my true son, uncomely though he be. And methinks he is yet alive, for no wounded man could deal a blow like this; and had there been other wolves there, they could not have borne him off so clean but what some trace of him would be left. What ho! without there! Go quickly forth, knaves, some six of ye, with spear and wood-knife, and let this fellow guide ye to the spot where the wolf was slain; and whoso brings tidings of my son shall have for his guerdon as many silver pennies as he can grasp in one hand."

The men obeyed with a will, for this sullen, ill-favoured, awkward lad, while hated and despised by his equals, had always been strangely popular with those beneath him; and there was not one of his father's men-at-arms who would not have gladly perilled life and limb for his sake.

But this time there was no need to do either, for hardly had the searchers gone half a mile when they met the missing boy himself, and bore him home in triumph.

When Bertrand entered the hall, the expectant group started at the change that a few hours had wrought in him. Whether from the effect of the wonderful revelation made to him that day, or from the encouraging sense of having achieved a feat of which the best of those who despised him might have been proud, he seemed to have grown all at once from a rude, passionate, uncouth boy into a calm, fearless, self-reliant man. His once drooping head was now proudly erect; his heavy figure had an upright, manly bearing that half redeemed its clumsiness; and his harsh features wore a look of power and command that froze into wondering silence the jeers that rose to the lips of his handsome, scornful cousins.

The first to speak was the old knight, who, more ashamed of his momentary tenderness toward his lost son than of his former unjust harshness to him, relieved his feelings in the usual gentlemanly

style of that age—with a burst of oaths worthy of a street-rough.

"Honoured father and lady mother," said Bertrand, as he knelt to kiss the hands of his parents, seemingly not a whit discomposed by the verbal piquancy of his loving sire, "it grieves me much that ye have been ill at ease on my account. I had been here long since, had I not missed my way in the forest."

His hearers, who had expected him to boast of having slain the wolf, or at least make some allusion to it, exchanged glances of mute surprise.

"And what of this?" asked Sir Yvon, pointing to the gaunt grey carcass on the floor.

"It was not I who slew him," said the boy, with that innate modesty that in after years set off so strikingly the great deeds which he did. "He fell upon a half-crazed lad whom I met in the wood, and I, having let fall my knife by mischance, took him by the throat and strove to throttle him, in which grappling the boy came to my aid, and slew the beast with mine own knife."

There was another pause of silent amazement; and perhaps even the haughty youths who listened felt a passing twinge of shame at the thought that they had been mocking and despising one who could face such a monster with his bare hands, and well-nigh master it too.

"We will hear the rest of thy tale anon," said his father at last, "for, as the old saying goes, it is

ill talk between a full man and a fasting. Ho, there, fellows, bring hither some food straightway!"

He was at once obeyed; and Bertrand, hungry as a hawk after his late battle, fell to with a will, secretly pleased to find his rigid father relaxing for once the strictness of his oft-quoted rule—

> "They who came not at the first call
> Till the next meal gat nothing at all."

CHAPTER IV

Bertrand's Dream

It was midnight, and all was still in the castle save the ghostly hooting of an owl from some half-ruined turret above, and the long, dreary howl of a prowling wolf from the gloomy wood below.

But Bertrand du Guesclin, tired as he was, and still as was all around him, had never felt less inclined to sleep. The yet uncooled excitement of the first life-and-death struggle in which he had ever been engaged, the wonderful and dazzling prospect opened to his fiery spirit by the mysterious prediction of that day, above all, the inspiring thought that his courage had actually been owned to some extent, however ungraciously, even by those who had hitherto despised him, pulsed through his veins like living fire, and banished all thought of slumber.

Fevered and restless, the future champion of France at length thrust his heated face through the narrow window into the cool night-air, and was watching the rising moon peep timidly above the

black, whispering tree-tops, when his mother's voice was heard below—

"Assuredly Bertrand is indeed destined to great honour, for, had but one of these two spoken it, it must needs have been truth. How much more when they are both in one tale!"

The listening boy started, and held his breath to hear. What could his mother mean by "both"?

"Thou art right, dame," replied Sir Yvon's harsh tones, "for St. Thomas the Doubter himself, I ween, could find in this matter no room for unbelief. Bertrand goes forth at hazard into the wood, and meets there the pilgrim monk; and he, who knoweth the future as I know the blazonry of mine own escutcheon, tells the boy that he is chosen of Heaven to be the champion of the land! On the same day, and at the same hour, thou, knowing nought of all this, goest to yonder convent; and lo! the holy Sister Agnes, in whom is the spirit of prophecy, welcomes thee as one favoured of Heaven, and gives thee joy for that Bertrand is fated to be the glory of our house and of the whole realm of France. Who shall gainsay such testimony as that?"

The boy's heart throbbed as if it would burst; for, though he had known of his mother's purposed visit to the convent that day, this was the first that he had heard of its result.

The strange message was confirmed, then! Twice in one day had his future greatness been

foretold by tongues that could not lie; and, like his favourite hero, King David, he was singled out by the choice of God Himself to be exalted from a nameless youth into the deliverer of his people! What more could heart desire?

In the tumult of his feelings, the excited lad failed to catch his mother's answer; but he heard plainly his father's gruff tones in reply.

"How he is e'er to be famed in knightly arms, I see not, for he is too clumsily shapen for lance or saddle; and, moreover, with that Saracen face of his (which hath the fashion of the demons in our mystery-plays) how shall he e'er get him a lady-love? And what true knight can duly do his devoir (duty) without one?"

Again the boy missed his mother's reply; but its purport was easy to guess from Sir Yvon's growling rejoinder—

"Anger me not with thine ill-bodings, foolish wench. Heaven forbid that son of mine should ever be scholar or maker (poet), or any such useless vagabond! Methinks there is little fear of it, for, thank God, he can neither read nor write; so far, at least, he is a true Du Guesclin!"

Such was indeed the case, for the fourteenth-century gentleman prided himself even more on his utter ignorance of letters than his counterpart in our day on his knowledge of them.

"Moreover," went on the worthy castellan, striving to fortify himself with every assurance

against the dreaded risk of his son degenerating into an educated man, "the boy himself saith Brother Michael's words were, 'The champion of this land;' and in what wise should any champion aid his land, save with hand and weapon? 'Tis not with parchment and goose-feather, I trow, that men beat back sword and lance; nor is it with musty maxims stolen from dead men that one setteth armies in array. Nay, look not downcast, sweet; I meant not to chide thee, howbeit thy words chafed my rough humour somewhat. Break we now our parle, for it waxeth late, and it is full time we were sleeping."

And their voices died away.

Sir Yvon and his lady might have been less slow of belief could they have looked forward into the future barely the space of one long lifetime, to the day when France, in her sorest need, was to find a champion and deliverer, not in a strong and daring young noble, but in a gentle, dreamy, child-like peasant girl of Lorraine, who was destined to lead great armies to victory, capture strong cities, defeat great generals in battle after battle, and hand down to the admiration of all ages, so long as the world should last, the glorious name of Joan of Arc.

But all this was still in the unknown future; and the many perils then darkening over France might well have seemed, even to a shrewder brain than that of the rugged old Breton knight, to call

for a far abler champion than a passionate, headstrong, untaught boy of fourteen.

Within the realm, the smouldering rage of the trampled peasantry against the merciless oppression of the French nobles was gathering strength year by year, and was destined to explode ere long in that terrific outbreak that ante-dated the worst horrors of the French Revolution, and made all Europe shudder at the name of the Jacquerie. Without, the fiery young English king, Edward III., was already preparing to strike the first blow of that tremendous war which was to waste the best blood of France and England for many a year after his death. And to crown all, whereas England was as one man in her eagerness for the coming strife, France was fatally divided against herself, the king against the nobles, the nobles against each other, and the trampled people against both; and even the clergy were similarly divided between two rival popes, some adhering to Pope Clement of Rome, others to Pope Benedict of Avignon.

Long did Bertrand sit musing on such rumours of these things as had come to his ears, and on the strange twofold prophecy that had marked himself as the only one who could stay the tide of ruin that was about to overwhelm his country. It was long past midnight ere he closed an eye; and even when his growing weariness overpowered him at last, the wild thoughts that had

troubled his waking hours still haunted him in a dream.

He dreamed that he was making his way, slowly and painfully, through the pathless depths of a dark forest, amid which one solitary break gave him a glimpse of the walls and towers of a distant town. Suddenly rose before him the shadowy outline of a strange and monstrous shape, so dim in itself, and so faintly seen amid the gloomy twilight of the overarching trees, that he could hardly tell if it were a mighty serpent, or a long line of armed men marching in single file, till, all at once, a flash of fire sprang from what seemed to be the monster's head, revealing in all its hideousness the form of a huge dragon, with the iron claws, vast shadowy wings, and flaming breath assigned to it by popular tradition.

Just then came riding through the terrible forest, right toward the dragon's open jaws, a lady on a snow-white palfrey. Her garb was the usual dress of the time—a high, pointed cap, a long veil waving from it, and a flowing robe secured at the waist with an embroidered girdle; but her face was such as he had never seen before, dreaming or waking. Even its marvellous beauty was less striking than the sweet and holy calm that dwelt in every line of it, and the strange, solemn, almost prophet-like depth of earnestness in the large, lustrous eyes, which seemed to look beyond and above all the sorrows and perils of earth, with the

quiet confidence of one over whom neither peril nor sorrow had power any more.

At the first glimpse of her the dragon fell writhing to the earth, and the strange maiden, leaping lightly from her horse, planted her bare foot fearlessly on the monster's vast scaly bulk, and passed over its body unharmed, while at that moment broke from the sky overhead, in sweet music, the words of a familiar psalm—

"Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder; the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under foot."

Just then the prostrate monster's hideous head changed suddenly to a human visage almost as horrible—a brutal, ruffianly, soulless face, with a bristling red beard and a low, receding forehead, across which ran a broad smear of blood. For one instant the fierce eyes glared unutterably, and then became fixed and rayless, while a last shudder quivered through every ring of the mighty coils, ere they stiffened in death.

Then it seemed to Bertrand that he approached the wonder-working stranger, and strove to ask who she was, and whence she came; but his tongue was fettered, and not a word could he utter.

As he stood speechless, the dream-lady stepped up to him with a laurel wreath in her hand, and, placing it on his brow, said in a clear, musical voice—

"Hail to the champion of France!"

Instantly the words were echoed as if by an unseen multitude, in far-resounding chorus, strong and deep as the roll of a mighty sea, "Hail to the champion of France!" and, with that shout still in his ears, the dreamer started and awoke.

CHAPTER V

A Timely Rescue

THE later autumn of that year was already stripping the Breton woods of their leaves, and Bertrand du Guesclin's fifteenth birthday was not far away, when a band of horsemen, twelve in number, rode into the town of Dinan, under the lowering sky of a gloomy October morning, at a flagging pace, which told that they had already ridden long and hard.

Two knights in complete armour; two stalwart esquires in plainer but as serviceable harness; a brace of handsome, smooth-faced boy-pages, barely twelve years old, lightly and daintily armed, and visibly proud of their finery; and half a dozen sturdy men-at-arms, whose weather-beaten faces and battered steel caps showed them to be no novices in war.

Such a train would have been, in that age, a scanty following for one knight, much more for two. But, small as it was, it drew much attention from the passers-by; for the dress, arms, and faces of the travellers marked them as English, and

English faces and weapons, soon to be fatally familiar to the people of this quiet region, were a novelty among them as yet.

It was plain, however, that neither knights nor squires, but the two young pages, were the chief objects of attention, and certainly not without cause; for, apart from the gorgeous and somewhat foppish richness of their dress, they were as exactly alike as the twins in Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors."

Both had the same ruddy complexion, the same clear-cut, delicate features, the same bright blue eyes and wavy golden hair, the same height and build, the same precociously dignified and almost haughty bearing. Their very voices were the same; and, as if to make the confusion worse, they were dressed just alike! In a word, the closest observer could not have told which was which; and as ideal twin-brothers (which was just what they were), they might have matched the famous twins whose mishaps are chronicled in a popular song—

> "And when I died, the neighbours came
> And buried brother John!"

Of the two knights, the younger seemed a brisk, comely, jovial youth, whose rather weak face told that his arm would be worth more than his head in the stirring times that were at hand. The very reverse might have been said of his

companion, a tall, spare, sinewy man, with a grave and rather sombre face, which would have been handsome but for the sinister look given to it by the thin, pinched lips and small, deep-set, crafty eyes. A keen observer might have noted that, even while talking gaily with his young comrade, Sir Simon Harcourt contrived to keep a close though unobtrusive watch on his two pages, whom he ever and anon addressed as "fair nephews."

Even before reaching the town gate the travellers met more than one startling example of the pleasant ways of that age.

On a huge tree by the wayside (whence a swarm of foul carrion birds flew screaming at their approach) hung the rotting corpse of a man, with his severed right hand nailed above him to show that he had been executed for highway robbery. Barely a hundred yards farther, a ragged, half-starved, wretched-looking creature begged alms of them in a lisping, whistling voice, fearfully explained by one glance at his disfigured face, the upper lip having been slit right up to the nostrils by the hangman's knife — the punishment then awarded by the laws of France to "all such as speak blasphemies against God and the holy Church."

A few minutes later a faint cry, half-drowned in a roar of savage laughter, drew their eyes to a deep, miry pool in a hollow below, in which a dozen ruffianly peasants were ducking a poor old

paralytic woman on suspicion of being a witch; and as they came up to the gate they beheld another sight even more characteristic.

Just outside the gate sat a man wrapped in a long mantle of coarse grey frieze, with a heavy stick beside him; and as they were about to pass he rose and said, with a bow not at all in keeping with his rough dress—

"I pray you of your courtesy, fair sirs, to have pity on a poor sinner, and give me, each of you, as ye pass, one handsome blow with this good cudgel for the health of my soul."

"Thou art doing penance, then?" said Harcourt, showing no surprise at a request that would have startled not a little any man of our day.

"Even as you say, Sir Knight," replied the man in grey. "In this town, well-nigh a year agone, I did a grievous sacrilege (may the saints forgive me!) and confessed it not, nor thought more of it, making light of Heaven's justice. But therein I erred greatly; for a sore sickness fell upon me, and, with the terror of death on my soul, I confessed my sin to a holy monk, and he appointed me this penance—that I should abide at the gate of this town, where my fault was wrought, with none other shelter than this mantle, craving a thwack from every one that went in or out, till I should have made up the full tale of three hundred stripes, according to the number of the days that passed

betwixt the doing of my sin and the confessing thereof."

"And how much lack'st thou yet of the number?" asked the younger knight.

"No more than forty and four, God be thanked," said Grey-cloak.

"No more?" cried the young cavalier. "Nay, if that be all, I will gladly aid thee, as one Christian man should aid another, by discharging on thy shoulders, with mine own hand, the whole remaining debt."

"I thank you humbly for your goodness, fair sir," said the penitent, as gratefully as if the other had offered him the highest possible service; "but alack! it may not be. But one stroke may I have from each man who passeth, and all else is nought."

"'Tis pity," replied the young knight; "but, sith better may not be, we will do what we can. Here be some twelve of us, and we will at least help thee a dozen stripes nearer to the balancing of thine accompt."

One by one the twelve whacks were duly administered, and then the train rode on again—the knights exchanging meaning glances, the pages tittering audibly, and the men-at-arms (who had evidently no idea of anything ludicrous in what had passed) grave as judges, while the thrashed man, as he rubbed his bruised shoulders, called after them, obviously in perfect good faith—

"May Heaven requite you for your goodness,

kind sirs, and help you in your need as ye have helped me."

Hardly had the riders entered the town when they were almost swept away by the rush of a mob of townspeople—men, women, and children—all hurrying so eagerly toward the great market-place, that they scarcely heeded Sir Simon's inquiry to what spectacle they were thronging in such haste.

But the answer, when it did come, was amply sufficient. These eager sightseers were running to see a man put to death.

The French wit who caustically said that he had "witnessed all the public amusements of England, from the quiet cheerfulness of a funeral to the boisterous gaiety of a hanging," might have uttered his cruel jest as sober earnest, had he lived in the "good old days" of Edward III. In that iron age, the mere sport of which was a mimicry of war in which brave men were constantly falling by the hands of their best friends or nearest kinsmen, all classes alike ran to enjoy the sight of tortures and executions, as we should now enjoy a circus or a pantomime; and crippled beggars, and mothers with babes at their breasts, would drag themselves for miles through dust or rain to see a criminal broken on the wheel or burned alive.

Thus it was now. As the knights and their train rode on through the narrow, crooked, filthy

streets, the ever-growing crowd thickened around them, till at last Harcourt was fain to place at the head of the troop his three strongest men-at-arms, who cleared the way unceremoniously with their stout spear-shafts. Thus they continued to advance slowly, till a sudden turn round the corner of the great square brought the whole dreadful scene before them at once.

Just in front of the town hall, at the very spot where Bertrand du Guesclin afterwards fought his famous combat with the English champion, Thomas of Canterbury, rose like an island out of the sea of upturned faces a high wooden platform, on which, in an iron frame filled with blazing wood, stood a huge cauldron, big enough to cook an ox whole.

All around this scaffold (for such it was) glittered the weapons of a double row of halberdiers in steel caps and buff-coats, as a barrier against the surging crowd. Above them, on one side of the platform, stood the Governor of Dinan himself (a portly, middle-aged, rather stern-looking man in a suit of embroidered velvet) amid a group of richly dressed officials; and beside him was his secretary, a prim, grave man in black.

On the farther side of the scaffold, close to the now steaming cauldron (on which their eyes were fixed with a look of hungry, wolfish expectation) stood three short, sturdy, ill-looking fellows, ominously clad in blood-red shirts and hose, with

their brawny arms bare to the shoulder. There was no need to ask who they were; a child would have known them at a glance for the executioner and his two assistants.

But it was neither the gaily dressed officials nor their grim satellites who drew the chief attention of the crowd. All eyes were fixed on a bare-headed, half-stripped figure just behind the men in red, with heavy fetters on its wrists and ankles. This wretched creature lay helplessly heaped together as if paralyzed by weakness, or benumbed with terror; and the deathlike paleness of his coarse face, with the fixed stare of blank, stony horror in his bloodshot eyes, would have told to the most careless observer that this was the man who was doomed to die.

"Mother, mother!" cried a young girl, who stood at a window of a tall corner-house, "hither, hither quickly! The water is nigh to the seething, and it were pity for thee to miss the sight of the punishment."

"Thou art right, Jeanneton," said a buxom matron, stepping up beside her, "and the better luck ours that our window looks right down on the scaffold. From hence I can see the fellow's very face (and marry! 'tis as pale as a spectre!) at mine ease, without being trampled in yon crowd as one treads grapes in the vintage."

Just then the blast of a trumpet echoed through the still air, and a fantastically dressed man,

stepping to the front of the platform, made proclamation as follows:—

"Oyez, oyez, oyez (hearken)! Hereby let all men know that forasmuch as Pierre Cochard, of the town of Dinan-le-Sauveur, in the bishopric of St. Malo, hath been found guilty of sundry crimes and misdeeds, and notably of clipping and debasing the coin of our lord the king, therefore hath the king's grace ordained, of his great clemency and justice, that even as the said Pierre Cochard hath melted and defaced the good and lawful coin of this realm, so shall he be himself melted and defaced in like fashion, till no trace of him remain; to wit, that he die by water and by fire, being plunged into yon cauldron, and therein boiled alive. God save the king!"

Of all the countless listeners, not one had the least perception of the horrible irony that lurked in this prayer to the God of mercy for the welfare of a king who could doom his fellow-men to a death like this. All they saw in the whole affair was a rogue receiving his due; nor could far more civilized ages triumph over them on that score, since, as much as three centuries later, seven men were hanged and a woman burned for the same offence in England itself.

When the herald's voice had died away, there sank over that great multitude a dead hush of terrible expectation, amid which the executioner's harsh tones were plainly heard to the farthest

corner of the square, as he said to the governor, with a clumsy obeisance—

"My lord, the water boils, and all is ready!"

At the words, as if that dread signal had broken the spell that paralyzed him, the doomed man sprang to his feet with a long, wild scream of mortal agony, so terrific that even the brutal mob shuddered as they heard it.

But the executioner and his mates, to whom such horrors were a mere everyday matter, remained wholly unmoved, and advanced to their fell work with perfect unconcern. Already they had clutched the victim to hurl him into the boiling cauldron, when his eyes, as they wandered despairingly over the unpitying crowd below, lighted up with a sudden flash of recognition, and, wrenching himself with a mighty effort from the grasp of his tormentors, he flung out his fettered arms wildly, and shrieked, in tones more like the yell of a wounded wild beast than a human voice—

"Brother Michael! Pilgrim of God! save me, save me!"

"Who calls me?" replied a clear, commanding voice from the other side of the square. "If any man need mine aid, I am here."

At the same instant the crowd, close-packed as it was, parted like water, and through it came the mysterious monk whom Bertrand du Guesclin had met in the wood seven months before.

As he came up the steps of the scaffold, it was

strange to see how all the actors in that horrible drama, from the pompous, self-important governor down to the brutal, soulless headsman, shrank from his look, and cast down their eyes as if detected in some shameful misdeed. True, they were only obeying the law; but perhaps, in the presence of this higher and purer nature, even these bigoted upholders of a law that was itself a fouler crime than any that it punished had, for one moment, some dim perception of a truth that the world has always been slow to learn—viz. that to treat men like wild beasts is hardly the way to make them better.

"Yon grey friar is a *man*," said one of Sir Simon's pages approvingly to the other, little dreaming how strangely he and Brother Michael were one day to come in contact. "Mark you, brother, how boldly he stands up in the midst, and how one and all give way to him? There was a good soldier lost to France, methinks, when he donned frock and cowl."

And his brother fully agreed with him.

As soon as the pilgrim-monk was seen to mount the scaffold, he at once became the leading figure of this grim tableau, casting all others into the shade. The stately governor, the richly attired officers, the ranks of helmeted spearmen, dwindled into mere accessories, and all eyes were fixed in breathless expectation on the solitary monk himself.

"Peace be with ye, my children," said he, in a voice which, low and gentle as it was, was heard

over the whole square amid that tomb-like silence. "What man called to me for aid but now? and what is this that ye do here?"

For the first time in his life the worthy governor found some difficulty (to his own great amazement) in saying plainly that he was about to torture a man to death in the name of justice. But the ghastly accessories of the scene spoke for themselves, and a few words sufficed to put Brother Michael in possession of the whole case.

"What ill-luck brought him here?" growled a savage-looking fellow in the crowd, as he marked and rightly interpreted the effect of the monk's sudden intervention. "What if he plead for this dog's pardon, and so lose us the sport of seeing the rogue die, after all?"

"Hush, for thy life, Gaspard!" muttered tremulously the man to whom he spoke. "Know'st thou not that yon monk hath such power as had the blessed saints of old, and that, had he heard these sacrilegious words of thine, it had cost him but the lifting of his finger to smite thee with palsy where thou standest? Heed well thy tongue, I counsel thee, lest it be withered betwixt thy jaws."

Meanwhile the governor and his officers had fallen back to one side of the scaffold, and the three executioners to the other, leaving monk and criminal alone in the midst.

"Art thou guilty of what they lay to thy charge,

my son?" asked Michael, bending over the prisoner, who was grovelling at his feet and clinging to them with the frantic energy of utter desperation.

"I am, I am!" moaned the doomed wretch, looking up at him imploringly. "But thou canst save me if thou wilt."

"Even so spake the leper unto our Lord Himself," said the monk, with a strange smile on his worn face; "and as he said, so it was done to him."

Then he turned to the officials with a look so solemn and commanding, that to their startled eyes his slight form seemed to grow larger as they gazed.

"Hearken, my sons. Ye know that to me, all unworthy as I am, hath been given power to claim a man's life from the law when fit cause shall appear. Now, methinks it were better for this man to live and repent than to be cut off in his sins, wherefore I claim him as the Church's prisoner."

In that age and that region there could be but one answer to such a claim, especially when made by one who was held to be little, if at all, less than a saint himself; and though the governor flushed angrily at this trespass on his privilege of destruction, and the hangman scowled sullenly to see his prey snatched from him, no one dared to object.

"He is thine," said the governor, sulkily. "Clerk, make entry to that effect."

But the scratching of the clerk's ready pen on the parchment was suddenly drowned by the thud of a heavy fall, as the rescued criminal, unable to sustain the terrific shock of this unexpected deliverance, fell down in a fit.

He recovered, however, to live long and peacefully in the monastery where his rescuer placed him, extolled by its prior as the best of his lay-servants. But that day's vision of death had been too close and too ghastly for its influence ever to pass wholly away; and to the end of his days, he could never hear, without shuddering and swooning, the hiss and bubble of boiling water.

CHAPTER VI

Mighty to Strike

"Now, beshrew these darksome woods, with ne'er a path through them! I had rather (so help me good St. George of England!) be set to find my way through yon Maze of Woodstock, of which the ballad-makers tell."

"Right, comrade. And methinks these thickets, where twenty men might lie in ambush unseen within a spear's length of us, are a choice chapel for the clerks of St. Nicholas" (*i.e.* robbers).

"Nay, if that were all, I care not, for even a passing brush with forest-thieves or outlaws were better than no fight at all; and I trow the lasses in merry Hampshire will hold us cheap when they hear that we have come oversea without one fight to rub the rust off our weapons. But, if all tales be true" (the speaker sank his voice to an awe-stricken whisper), "there be worse things than thieves in these woods."

"Not a word of that, lad, an' thou lov'st me. There is a time and a place for all things, as good

Father Gregory was wont to say; and this" (casting a nervous glance over his shoulder into the deepening gloom around) "is neither the time nor the place, I trow, for tales of sprites and hobgoblins."

Thus muttered Sir Simon Harcourt's men-at-arms as they struggled wearily through the wood that had witnessed Bertrand du Guesclin's wolf-fight, on the third evening after their departure from Dinan. But in exercising so freely an Englishman's natural privilege of grumbling, the stout Hampshire yeomen were by no means without excuse.

They had been forcing their way for more than an hour through the tangled thickets of a gloomy and almost pathless wood, without ever coming any nearer, so far as they could see, either to getting clear of that dismal maze or reaching the town of Rennes, where they meant to spend the night. Then, darkness was coming on fast, menacing them with the far from agreeable prospect of wandering in the woods all night long; and last, but certainly not least, the huge black storm-cloud that was blotting out the red and angry sunset betokened the approach of such a tempest as even the hardy English would not willingly have faced unsheltered.

"'Tis not for myself I care," said one of them; "shame on the man who makes moan like a child over a wet jerkin or an empty stomach. But my

young lords are not ripe yet for hungry days and wet nights, and I ever deemed that his worship, Sir Simon, did not well to bring them hither."

He glanced pityingly as he spoke at the slim forms of the two boy-pages.

"Why say'st thou so, Dickon?" cried another man. "Surely 'tis well for a bold lad to see the world a bit, in place of being mewed up at home like a caged singing-bird!"

"Ay, but how if the bold lad fall sick and die, through being not yet strong enow for such rough work?"

"Dickon is right," chimed in an older man. "My young lords (God bless them both!) are full young yet for open field and hard fare; and methinks," he added in a cautious undertone, "their loving uncle yonder would not be too sorely grieved, were it to befall them as Dickon hath said!"

"What say'st thou?" asked three or four voices at once, in tones of dismay.

"Know ye not he is the next heir after their death?" said the veteran, with grim significance. "Didst ever hear yon ballad of the 'Babes in the Wood'?"

"Why, comrade, thou canst not mean, surely——"

"Nay, I mean nought. A man may speak of a good ballad, and no harm done."

But the old soldier's gloomy hints had left their mark, and thenceforth he and his comrades rode on in sombre silence.

Meanwhile the two knights who headed the train were in no blither mood.

"St. Edward! 'tis as if we were in one of the enchanted woods whereof romances tell, in which a man may wander for ever, and ne'er get one foot from his starting-place!" cried the younger man, impatiently. "My mind misgives me, Sir Simon, that we have gone much astray."

"In sooth, I fear we have; yet methinks we did our best to follow such directions as we got in yon village, if indeed we rightly understood them, for this peasant-jargon is right hard to interpret."

"I would I could meet one of these same peasants now, be his jargon what it might; for how shall we ask our way, if there be no man here of whom to ask it?"

"Nay, methinks I espy a man now, in the shadow of yon trees. Let us hail him. What ho, friend! are we yet nigh to Rennes?"

"To Rennes?" echoed the stranger, in a tone of amazement. "Alack, noble sirs, ye be much astray. Ye have been making straight away from the town, and were ye to turn your steeds this moment, two long leagues, and more, must ye ride to reach it."

The younger knight growled something that did not sound like a blessing, and the rough English yeomen relieved their overwrought feelings with a burst of hearty English maledictions on Brittany, its woods, its people, and all belonging to it.

"Two leagues!" repeated Sir Simon; "the storm would be on us ere we were halfway. Hark ye, fellow, is there no dwelling near, where we may find shelter for the night?"

"Surely, noble sir; not a quarter of a league hence lieth the castle of Messire Yvon du Guesclin, who will make your worships right welcome."

"That is good hearing," said the younger knight, more cheerily. "Guide us thither, good fellow, and thou shalt have a silver mark for thy pains."

"Gramercy for thy kindness, good Sir Knight; that will I do blithely," said the man, eager to seize the chance of earning more money in half an hour than he had often made in a month. "Be pleased to follow me."

Piloted by their new guide, the travellers soon got clear of these perplexing woods, and ere long saw before them, looming dimly through the fast-falling darkness of night, the shadowy outline of a high tower, from which, as they advanced, came faintly to their ears a clamour of loud and angry voices, a trampling of feet, the clatter of blows, and the ring of steel.

"We are in luck!" cried the younger knight, joyfully. "They are fighting within, and we are just in time, the saints be praised, for our share of the sport!"

Knights, squires, and pages loosened their swords in the sheath with a business-like and

cheerful air; for, to any man of those rough times, the mere fact that a fight was going on anywhere within reach was a good reason for joining in, without caring a straw what was the cause of quarrel, or on which side lay the right.

But, to explain this tumult, we must go back a little.

Four or five of the Du Guesclin men-at-arms were lounging about the castle-yard of Motte-Brun, on their return from escorting their lady on another visit to the convent, when there came gliding among them, with a half-tripping, half-sliding step, a pale, meagre, flighty-looking man, whose fantastic dress, and parti-coloured cap adorned with small bells, showed him to be one of those nondescript personages, half idiot and half jester, who led, in the households of the gentry of that age, the life of a spaniel in a lion's cage—now taking liberties with their masters of which no one else would have dared to dream, and now being scourged till the blood ran down, when one of those liberties happened to be ill received.

"Ha! why wentest not thou forth with us, Messire Roland?" cried one of the soldiers to the jester, whom his master had named in joke after the famous legendary champion of Charlemagne. "Had we been beset by thieves, we had sorely missed the aid of thy puissant arm."

"Not so," said Roland; "had ye been bare-headed, ye were safe enow without aid of mine,

for never was blade forged in Brittany that could hew through skulls as thick as yours!"

A hoarse laugh applauded the retort, such as it was.

"Well, better a thick skull than an empty one, methinks," chuckled another of the band, with a meaning leer at the jester.

"Mock me not, slave!" cried Roland, majestically, "or I will hold thee so fast that thou shalt gladly pay ransom to get free again."

"Thou?" said the brawny, red-bearded giant whom he addressed, eyeing his challenger's puny frame with a look of scorn.

"Even I," replied the buffoon, solemnly. "Think'st thou that because I am weak in body, I cannot be strong in magic? I promise thee, on the faith of a madman, I will pin thee as fast as yon Paynim baron of old time, Seigneur Theseus, who was set so fast in the stocks in purgatory, that when the good knight, Sir Hercules, tore him away by main force, his legs were left behind. Sit thee down here, and mark what shall come to pass."

The big man sat down, as bidden, on a low stone bench by the wall, and folded his huge arms with an air of defiance.

"Abracadabra!" shouted the jester, flourishing his hands within an inch of the soldier's nose. "The spell is spoken: rise if thou canst!"

The giant, with a scornful laugh, attempted to do so; but just behind him projected from the wall

a strong iron hook, which (as the crafty jester had foreseen) caught the upper edge of his steel back-plate as he tried to rise, and held him down as firmly as if he were nailed to the spot!

Scared out of his wits by this strange and sudden bewitchment, the unlucky man roared like a bull, making the air ring with howls for help, fragments of half-forgotten prayers, broad Breton oaths, and vows to every saint whose name he could recollect. Meanwhile the other men (who saw at once the real cause of his strange paralysis) danced round him in ecstasy, and gave vent to roar after roar of such boisterous laughter as seemed to shake the very tower above them.

"Art thou convinced now, unhappy boaster?" said the buffoon, in a tone of condescending pity, calculated to drive the big spearman stark mad. "What ransom wilt thou pay to be freed?"

"I have but three silver groats," gasped the victim; "take them, and free me."

"So be it!" said Roland, with the air of a king pardoning a peasant; and, pocketing the money, he laid his hands on the giant's shoulders, bent him down till he was freed from the hook, and said impressively, "Rise!"

The spell-bound man sprang up like a captive bursting from his dungeon, and turning hastily round, caught sight of the hook.

One glance at it, coupled with a fresh roar of laughter from his comrades, told him the whole

story. With a howl like a speared wolf, he flew at the jester's throat; but Roland, fully prepared, vanished ghost-like into the dark archway of the nearest door.

Poor Roland's escape, however, was a case of "out of the frying-pan into the fire;" for, as he darted into the doorway, he came like a battering-ram against Alain de St. Yvon himself (the eldest of Bertrand's three overbearing cousins, who was just coming out to learn the cause of all this uproar), driving his head into the young noble's chest with such force as to hurl him back against the wall.

"Base-born dog!" roared the enraged Alain, in the courteous style usual with gentlemen to their inferiors in that "chivalrous" age, "I will teach thee to thrust thy vile carcass in my way! Ho there, fellows! seize this cur, and scourge him till his hide be as tattered as his wits!"

The men-at-arms (with whom the poor jester was a prime favourite) were unwillingly advancing to obey, when a voice broke in from behind, deep and menacing as the roll of distant thunder—

"Who dare talk of scourging my father's servant in his own castle, without leave given or asked? Let any man lift a hand on him, and he shall have to do with me!"

There, in the midst of them, stood Bertrand du Guesclin, with his swarthy face all aglow, and his small, deep-set eyes flaming like live coals.

For a moment Alain himself stood aghast, for

never till now had his despised cousin asserted himself like this; and his two brothers, Raoul and Huon (who had just come upon the scene), were equally astounded. There was a brief pause of indecision, and then the young bully's native insolence broke forth anew.

"Who bade thee interfere, thou mis-shapen cub?" cried he, fiercely. "Thou shalt see thy brother-fool get his deserts forthwith, and all the more because thou pleadest for him. Ho, Charlot! give yon whining cur a taste of thy whip."

The man he addressed (a thickset, savage-looking groom that he had brought with him to the castle) stepped forward with a grin of cruel glee on his coarse, low-browed face; but as he neared his victim, young Du Guesclin threw himself between, and grimly motioned him back.

"An thou lov'st thy life, forbear!" said he, in the low, stern tone of one who fully meant what he said; "I will not warn thee twice."

Had the fellow been in his right senses, one glance at Bertrand's face would have been warning enough. But he was rarely sober at that time of day, and all his natural insolence was aroused by this challenge from one whom he had always looked upon as a mere cipher in the household.

"Big words break no bones!" said he jeeringly, as he stretched his hand to seize the cowering jester.

Not a word said Bertrand in reply; but he caught up a stout pole that lay near, and brought

it down like a thunderbolt full on the ruffian's head. But that his cap was a thick one, and the skull beneath it thicker still, the cowardly rascal would never have struck a helpless man again ; even as it was, he fell like a log, and lay senseless on the pavement, with the blood gushing from his mouth and nose.

Alain, now fairly beside himself with fury, sputtered out a curse too frightful to be written down, and flew at his cousin, sword in hand.

Down came the pole once more, breaking off the sword-blade close to the hilt, and snapping like a reed with the force of the blow. In another moment, Bertrand found himself in the grasp of all three brothers at once.

And then began such a struggle as the oldest soldier there had never seen. Roused to the utmost by his cousin's insolent cruelty, and by that noble impulse to protect the helpless which was the mainspring of his whole life, Bertrand dragged the three stalwart youths hither and thither like children, and more than once well-nigh mastered all three together. Huon's arm was crushed against a sharp corner, and bruised from wrist to elbow ; Raoul got a black eye from a projecting spout ; and Alain himself, with his gay clothes almost torn from his back, and his throat purple from the clutch of Bertrand's iron fingers, had good cause to repent of his bullying. At last all four came down in a confused heap, young Du Guesclin undermost.

The three young men scrambled slowly to their feet again, torn, bruised, and aching from top to toe; but their ill-starred cousin remained lying where he had fallen, with the blood streaming over his face.

"What means this?" roared a tremendous voice amid the terrified silence that followed. "Is my castle a village tavern, that men should brawl in it?"

The turbulent youths shrank from the eye of their enraged uncle, who was bending over his prostrate son, with a look of such anxiety as he rarely showed for him, when a trumpet-blast was heard outside the gate.

"Here be guests," said the old knight, rising hastily. "Look forth quickly, Petit-Jean, and see who they be. Some of ye bear this boy to his chamber, and let his hurt be well looked to. And as for you, ye malapert lads, go make ye fit to be seen in the hall, for, by St. Yves, ye seem in your present guise more like drunken beggars at a village fair!"

The abashed brawlers slunk away, glad to escape so easily; and the porter, having reconnoitred from the window of the gate-tower those who stood without, and exchanged a few words with them, announced to his master that two English knights, on their way to visit the Duke of Brittany, craved lodging for themselves and their train.

"Admit them forthwith," said the castellan, as much pleased as any other country gentleman of his time at the coming of a guest who could give him all the news of the day, and whose gossip was to that age what a daily paper is to our own.

The guests were heartily welcomed, and, the evening meal being already prepared, it was placed on the board as soon as the visitors were ready, much to the satisfaction of the latter, who had been in the saddle since morning.

When Alain and his brothers made their appearance, they still bore visible marks of the recent fray; but in that bone-breaking age it was quite the correct thing for a young man of rank to wear a face like a beaten prize-fighter; and Sir Simon Harcourt mentally decided that these were "exceeding gentle and good young men."

"I give thee joy, my noble host," said he, bowing courteously to the three tall youths as they entered; "thou hast a goodly muster of sons to carry on thy name."

"Gramercy for thy courtesy, fair sir," said the old castellan, reddening slightly, "but these lads are no sons of mine; they are but my dead sister's orphan children. But one son have I, and he may not quit his chamber, being somewhat ill at ease with a hurt he hath gotten."

How his son had got that hurt, the good knight did not think fit to say.

Sir Yvon listened eagerly to all his visitors'

news, being specially delighted to hear that a new war was expected between France and England. Filling his silver goblet to the brim, he uttered the toast, "May we soon meet again on the battlefield!" as heartily as if he were wishing his guests every kind of prosperity.

The latter echoed the pledge with a heartiness natural to an age when men were feasting together at one moment and fighting together the next; and Harcourt said, with a quick glance at his boy-nephews—

"Here be two lads, fair sir, who will blithely say Amen to that good wish of thine, for they have never seen a stricken field; and, in truth, Alured and Hugo de Claremont are the heads of our house, though they now serve me as pages."

"The better for them!" cried the old knight, looking approvingly at the two handsome, high-bred faces, and secretly rejoicing at the accident that had kept his own ugly son from being contrasted with them. "There is nought like discipline for young blood, and he who has not learned to obey as a page will never be fit to command as a knight. I drink to you, Master Alured, and to you, Master Hugo; and soon may ye both win your spurs on some well-fought field!"

And then, at a sign from his master, the household minstrel (for every baron of that age "kept a poet," like the London firm in the old story) struck up a very appropriate song—

"The Merchant he sitteth 'mid bags of coin
With a grave and wrinkled brow;
He loveth to hold the good red gold,
But he likes not the steel, I trow!
His wares sell high to all who can buy,
And of two he can well make three;
But he knows not to wield the blade and shield—
What profit, what profit is he?

"The Scholar he spelleth out learned lore
From his parchment's musty fold;
He is skilled to look in many a book
Writ by hands that have long been cold.
But his thin white hand never grasped a brand,
Nor ever made lance-shaft flee,
And pale is his cheek, and his arm is weak—
What profit, what profit is he?

"The Minstrel he roams from land to land
In his flaunting robe so gay,
And light o'er the strings his soft hand he flings
As he pours the melting lay.
They feed him high, and they lodge him well,
And rich is his golden fee;
But his hand ne'er did feel the gauntlet of steel—
What profit, what profit is he?

"But the softest pillow the Warrior hath
Is the boss of his battered shield,
Where the firebrand's light, thro' the murky night,
Glares red on the foughten field.
The wares *he* loves are of good hard steel,
His music, the sword-clang free;
And when foemen stand 'gainst his native land,
Good profit, good profit is he!"

At daybreak on the morrow the knights and their train left the castle on their way to Rennes. As the twin pages rode after their uncle, Alured

de Claremont turned for a last look at the grim old tower, and Bertrand du Guesclin (who, having begun to get over the effects of his broken head, had dragged himself to his window to witness the departure) looked down in wondering admiration, not wholly untinged with envy, on the English boy's bright, comely face, little guessing under what terribly changed conditions he was one day to see that face again.

"Had I but a face like yon lad!" said the Breton boy, with a deep sigh. "Why should he be the delight of every eye, and I a loathing to all that look upon me?"

But then came back to him the pilgrim-monk's warning to "curb his own rebellious spirit," and with it came the memory of the strange dream in which he had seen himself crowned with laurels as the champion of France. His face brightened at the recollection, and he knelt down with a lighter heart to say his morning prayer.

CHAPTER VII

A Strange Tale

"Raise thy lance-point a thought higher, lad; ay, so. Now put thy steed to his full career, but see thou keep him well in hand. Now wheel him—so, deftly done! Yet a few months' training, and, though thou hast but sixteen years, and needest no barber, I trow thy gay cousins will find thee their match, boast as they may."

The speaker was Sir Godefroi de Tinteniac, a near neighbour of the Sire du Guesclin; and the lad whom he was training to manage horse and lance on a wide sweep of greensward a few miles from Rennes, was Bertrand du Guesclin himself.

"Think you, then, noble sir," said Bertrand, with sparkling eyes, "that, with the aid of your kind teaching, I may yet make some figure in the ranks of chivalry?"

"That thou wilt, and no mean figure either, if I know aught of men," said the old knight, heartily. "I ever said thy kinsfolk did ill to leave thee thus untaught, and to gloom upon thee because thou hast not the smooth face of my lady's page, nor the

dainty shape of a court-minion. Marry, if it were sin to be hard-favoured, what of me?"

Bertrand could not repress a smile as he glanced at the veteran warrior's grim visage (which, thanks to the countless scars that seamed it, was almost as ugly as his own), and Sir Godefroi smiled good-humouredly in his turn.

"Thou seest they lie not who call me 'The Grim Knight,'" said the old gentleman, with a hoarse chuckle. "Hark ye, my son; how if I appoint myself thy godfather, and dub thee the Grim Knight after myself? A good knight may be grim, thou know'st, in the eyes of foes as well as friends; and I warrant thou wilt not shame the title."

"Gramercy for your courtesy, kind sir," said Du Guesclin, with characteristic modesty, "but 'tis overmuch for one who hath never done any deed of arms. Wait but till I have proved my manhood, and then will I be prouder to be your godson, than if men should crown me King of France!"

"So be it; and methinks I shall not wait long. But who comes here in such hot haste?"

Two men were seen galloping toward them, the foremost of whom, as he came nearer, proved to be one of Tinteniac's own followers, seemingly acting as guide to a tall, soldier-like man-at-arms, in a steel cap and leathern "jack," quilted with lozenge-shaped scales of iron, on a strong black horse.

"Here is one with a letter and token, an't please

your worship," said the retainer, "which he is charged to give into no hand but your own."

The letter was mere Greek to Sir Godefroi, who, like most gentlemen of his time, could neither read nor write, and was vastly proud of the fact. But the token (a small ruby ring) seemed to have a special importance of its own, for hardly had he looked at it, when he said hastily to Bertrand—

"Think me not uncourteous, I pray, if I leave thee somewhat suddenly, for this matter must be dealt with straightway. Follow me to the castle, good fellow," added he to the messenger, "and when thou hast had food and rest, thou shalt bear back mine answer."

Away he dashed, attended by his own follower, while Du Guesclin and the messenger came after them at an easier pace.

"Thou art well mounted, friend," said Bertrand, eyeing the man's splendid horse admiringly. "Hast ridden him far to-day?"

"From Chateau Raguenel, my lord, since I broke my fast; and he hath borne me well, too, for, having charge to make speed, I let not grass grow under his hoofs, I trow."

"Chateau Raguenel!" cried the boy. "A good ride, in sooth! and, as thou say'st, he hath borne thee well, for few steeds would have carried a man of thy inches so far, and shown as smooth a coat when 'twas over."

He patted the gallant beast's smooth, shining

neck; and it pricked its ears at the caress, and rubbed its velvety muzzle against his shoulder.

"Now I bethink me," resumed Bertrand, "is not the Sire de Raguenel he who hath a daughter that is a fairy?"

"Say rather a saint," cried the man-at-arms warmly; "for, were the Lady Epiphanie to be taken up to heaven this very day, like the blessed St. Eloi (Elijah) of old, the angels would find little to mend in her, to fit her for their company!"

"I meant no slur on the lady—Heaven forbid!" said Du Guesclin, quickly. "But methinks I have heard men call her 'Tiphaine la Fée'."

"It may not be denied that she has strange power, though she has ever used it for good," replied the spearman, sinking his voice to an impressive whisper. "Without doubt she can read the future as I would the face of the sky; and there is such might in her lightest word that none may say her nay. In truth, had she not had power to make me break a vow that I had made (and that, too, when she was but a child) by this time my body had been feeding the ravens on a gallows-tree, and my soul in a worse place still."

"Say'st thou so?" cried Bertrand, eyeing him keenly. "Tell me the tale, then, for it must needs be worth hearing."

The soldier, visibly pleased at finding so attentive a listener to a story that he was evidently burning to tell, began as follows—

"I am of Normandy, noble sir, and it fared with me as with other peasants of those parts; all alike were crushed and trampled down by the oppression of our master. Count me not, I pray, as one who loves to speak ill of dignities, for well I wot that men cannot live without seigneurs and nobles, and that a land which lacked them would be as a body without bones; but in our case the old saying was made good, that the shepherd may be worse than the wolf. This man had his cottage burnt down, and that man had his daughter carried off, and the other had his only son hanged for killing a hare in his lord's woods, to save his old father from dying of hunger; and——"

"Say no more of that, good fellow," said the young noble, wincing as if in sudden pain. "I know but too well that many of us nobles have sinned grievously against God in such wise as thou sayest; and, for mine own part, I have made a solemn vow that if ever I rule in my father's stead (long may it be ere that day come!), every vassal of mine shall have as fair play as if he were the Duke of Brittany himself!"

"Now, may God bless you for that word, noble sir!" cried the other, fervently, "and would to Heaven every noble in the land would make the same vow, and keep it. But to my tale. Heavier and heavier waxed our burden, till at last we could bear no more; and we said in our hearts that it was better to die at once and all together, biting

and tearing to the last, as dies a wolf at bay, than be destroyed one by one, as a butcher slays sheep. So we forsook our homes, banded ourselves together, and went forth to the wild wood, to live by point of arrow and edge of knife!"

"Thou hast been an outlaw of the forest, then?" said Bertrand, with an interest unalloyed by any tinge of scorn or aversion; for, at a time when every petty baron was himself a robber on a grand scale, the disgrace in such cases lay not in having robbed, but in not having robbed enough.

"Ay, and a captain of outlaws, for I was the leader of our band; and they and I sware a solemn oath never to spare knight or noble who might fall into our hands; and, should we do so, the Evil One should that moment snatch us away."

"And how fared ye after that?" asked young Du Guesclin, eagerly.

"The ballads and romaunts would have us believe that outlaws live right merrily," said the ex-bandit, with a bitter smile; "but trust them not. Vengeance we had, indeed, in full measure; but vengeance is as when one eateth snow to slake one's thirst—it is good for a time, but then is the torment greater than before. And then for pleasure—such pleasure as we had was as when one in mortal pain drowneth his agony for a brief space in strong wine. While we were fighting and plundering and slaying, or rioting and revelling over our booty, we could hold at bay the thoughts

which hunted us like bloodhounds day and night; but when the drink had died out of us, and we lay awake beneath the black, whispering trees through the long dark hours of night, beside our dying fire, then was the time when the Wicked One dug his claws into our hearts! And then, with the thought of all that lay behind us, and still more with the thought of all that lay before, 'twas marvel we went not clean distraught!"

Here he paused a moment, as if overcome with the terror of these gloomy recollections, while Bertrand eyed him with a look of heartfelt pity which the rough soldier seemed fully to understand and appreciate.

"One night," he resumed at length, "we were at the height of our mad revels, shouting and brawling over our liquor, singing ribald songs, and defying Heaven itself with mockery and blasphemy, when all at once there stood in the midst of us, full in the light of the fire—no man could tell whence or how—a little child clothed in white, with long, fair hair, and a face like that of the Holy Child in the great minster-church of Rouen.

"Then we all shrank back affrighted, thinking no less than that this must be our Lord Himself, appearing to us in the same form in which He first came on earth; and all the black deeds we had done rose up at once in our memory, blacker than ever.

"The child came forward as boldly as if it had

no fear of our grim faces and bare blades, and, holding out her little hands to us, said pleadingly—

"'Oh, please come quick to help my father; he is sore hurt!'

"Then I plucked up heart somewhat, seeing that it was but a little maid of mortal mould; and I made shift to ask—

"'Who is thy father, fair child?'

"'The Sire Robert de Raguenel,' she replied."

"Raguenel!" echoed Du Guesclin. "Then this child was the Demoiselle Tiphaine herself!"

"Even she, and no other. Then she caught my wrist with both her tiny hands, as if to drag me with her by main force, and cried impatiently—

"'Quick—quick to my father! I have not strength to drag the horse off him myself!'

"We thought of our compact that the Evil One should carry us away if we ever spared knight or noble. We looked at each other, and at the child's pleading face, and then—we were all hurrying to her father's aid, one faster than another."

"Well done! well done!" shouted the boy-noble, excitedly. "And what befell next?"

"We found there an armed knight entangled beneath his steed, and all alone; for, as we learned later, he had outridden his train, and, losing his way in the darkness with but two followers, had got deeper into the wood instead of out. Then his horse, taking fright at the fire-glow and the din of our wild ado, had fallen with him and kept him

down, while his two retainers, thinking themselves assailed by the forest-demons, had left their lord and taken flight, like chicken-hearted dastards as they were."

"So, then," cried Bertrand, with sparkling eyes, "this child came alone into the midst of a band of armed robbers to seek help for her father! In good truth, 'twas as bold a deed as ever was done!"

"You say sooth, my lord. Braver deed hath no man done—no, not Roland himself! In a trice we got the knight clear of his steed and bore him away, for he was too sore hurt to walk. But there was well-nigh a fight among us who was to carry the child, for every one would be the man to do it. Howbeit, it was at last accorded to me as captain; and when I lifted her in my arms, and felt her tiny hand cling trustfully to my neck, I bethought me how St. Christopher bare the Holy Child in like manner across the flooded river, and, for the first time for many a weary month, I dared to pray."

Du Guesclin, more moved than he would have cared to own, held out his hand to the ex-robber, who grasped it warmly.

"By good hap the knight had no bones broken, though he was sore bruised; and, there being no doctor within a league, he mended apace, being a strong and likely man, and having the free air of the greenwood to aid him. As for the little demoiselle, she made friends with us straightway, sitting

on our knees and taking food from our hands as if she had known us all her life; and ere she had abode three days with us, there was not a man but would gladly have perilled his life to please her; and from brawls and blasphemy and mis-seeming words we refrained as heedfully as had we been before our holy father the pope.

"Now, when the good knight was once more able to sit saddle-fast, he called me unto him, and thus he said—

"'Good fellow, thou and thy comrades have done me right masterful service, and it is not the wont of Robert de Raguenel to show himself ungrateful. What men ye are I know not, nor care; but if ye be disbanded soldiers in quest of fresh employ' (and there was a twinkle in his eye as he spake, which showed he knew right well how the case really stood), 'ye might do worse than take service with me. How say ye?'

"You may think we were not minded to haggle over such an offer; but that all might be done fairly and honestly, I told him of our impious vow, which devoted our lives and souls to the Evil One. But he made light of it, saying that such vows were better broken than kept, and that as Satan had not claimed the forfeit, it was plain that he had no power to do it; and we should all be absolved from our rash oath as soon as we got into Brittany.

"'Then,' quoth I, 'ere we pledge ourselves to

be thy men, let yon fair child of thine pray for us to God; for methinks her pure soul is nearer to Him than the holiest monk in Christendom.'

"As I said, so it was done; and when I saw her tiny hands folded, and heard her clear, sweet voice praying for me—for *me!* it was as if a heavy stone were rolled from off my heart."

He ceased, and both were silent for a while.

"And since that time," asked Bertrand at last, "thou hast followed De Raguenel's banner?"

"That have I," said the Norman, "and follow it I will while I can put foot in stirrup, or take lance in hand."

"Long may'st thou be able to do both, brave man," said Du Guesclin, heartily. "But tell me, I pray thee—this Lady Tiphaine, who readeth the future as a pilot reads the stars, hath she ever told aught of thy destiny?"

"She hath, in good sooth, for my lord her father craved it of her; but all she told us thereof was that my life must end on that day when she should meet for the first time the man who was appointed to save her from her greatest peril, and aid France in its sorest need."

Du Guesclin started visibly, for the words brought back to his mind, suddenly and startlingly as a flash of lightning, his mysterious dream, and the strange prophecies that had preceded it; and for some moments he was silent and thoughtful.

"Said she who the destined man was to be?"

he inquired at length. "Some mighty champion, belike?"

"Nay, of that she said nought," replied the man-at-arms. "She did but tell us that the day of his coming should be the day of my death. And, for mine own part, I am well content with such a bode; for in this I am of the mind of an old hunting-hound—when my teeth fail, and others can do better service to my master and mistress than I can, then 'tis full time that my life should end."

CHAPTER VIII

Lance to Lance

It was a bright, warm, cloudless morning in the summer of 1337, and along the dusty high-roads of Brittany crowds of people were pouring toward Rennes from every side; for a great tournament was about to be held near the town, and at that period such displays aroused the same universal excitement, and drew together the same multitudes as a race-meeting of our own day.

The spot chosen for the scene of action was a wide sweep of grassy turf two or three miles from the town; and the motley crowds which thronged thither were quite as picturesque, in their way, as the pageant that they were hurrying to behold. Knights in full armour, all on fire to reach the spot where they hoped to win renown; richly dressed ladies, caracoling on costly Spanish jennets; local dignitaries in furred mantles, with gold chains round their necks; plainly garbed traders, looking quite homely amid the plumes and embroidery around them—for the laws of that age strictly forbade any man who was not of knightly rank to

copy the finery of the nobles; brisk, merry-eyed 'prentice-lads from the town, delighted with all this noise and bustle; and sturdy, shaggy-haired, hard-faced Breton peasants, in the broad slouched hat and knickerbocker-like "bragous," or knee-breeches, which have come down unchanged to our own time in that primitive region. And ever and anon came cleaving through the press, like a three-decker through a swarm of fishing-boats, the train of some great noble, whose men-at-arms kept shouting their master's name, and making way for him by thrusting aside the crowd with their horses, and letting fall their spear-shafts pretty smartly on the shoulders of such as were slow to give place.

Conspicuous among the gentlemen present was old Sir Yvon du Guesclin, who received many a courteous greeting as he passed; for though some men affected to look down upon him on account of his poverty, he was highly esteemed by others for his ancient descent and former renown in arms. In truth, the old knight's erect and commanding air, and the challenging glances of the three stalwart nephews who rode beside him, were an ample warning, even to such as liked him least, that to slight him to his face would be no safe undertaking.

Poor Bertrand had been left at home as usual, his uncompromising father declaring, with more truth than politeness, that he would be no

ornament to a knightly circle. But, strangely enough, this open affront, so far from angering the high-spirited youth, seemed rather to amuse him. He watched his father's train ride forth with such a smile of mischievous glee as might be worn by a schoolboy when planning some daring practical joke; and hardly had the last man-at-arms vanished among the trees, when our hero ordered out an old war-horse of his father's, and set off not to the scene of the tournament, but toward the castle of his friend the Sire de Tinteniac.

The wooden galleries erected for the spectators of rank filled apace, and ere long the whole circle was one great flower-bed of rich dresses, comely faces, and fluttering ribbons and plumes, while the plainer garb of the burghers and peasants below bordered like a dark hedge this fair garden of beauty and splendour; and the glitter of so many polished helmets and bright lance-points in the cloudless sunshine, together with the scores of gallant steeds that were prancing and snorting beneath their mailed riders, made a goodly show.

High in the front of the chief gallery, with his banner waving over him, sat the Duke of Brittany himself, John III., with his duchess beside him. His fine face looked bright and animated by the enjoyment of this martial pageant; but a keen observer might already have noted there the growing weakness that was to end in his death four years later, and to kindle between the rival

claimants of the disputed succession one of the bloodiest wars of that stormy age.

All was now ready for the sports, the arrangement being that the tilters should encounter each other in pairs till all had run one course apiece, and that the winners should then dispute the prize among them till only one was left unconquered, to whom the honours of the day should be awarded. Duke John gave the signal, and instantly the first pair of combatants rushed upon one another.

Tramp, tramp, crash! and down went the first man, rolling over and over amid a cloud of dust. Tramp, tramp, crash, again; and down rolled the winner in turn, horse and man falling together. Thus course after course was run, while the loud applause of the spectators mingled with the crash of breaking lance-shafts, the clang of steel, and the fierce snorting and neighing of the war-horses.

Peasants below and ladies above alike watched the combat with the keenest enjoyment, which derived much of its zest from the fact that the tilters, instead of using what were called "arms of courtesy" (pointless or blunted lances) met each other with the sharp spears used in actual war. When three or four of the overthrown champions were found to be so badly hurt that they had to be carried from the lists, the general delight naturally rose to a height, as was usual at a time when a tournament, in which four knights were killed outright and thirty more so desperately wounded

that many of them never recovered, was always spoken of as "a gentle and joyous passage of arms"!

Sir Yvon du Guesclin himself, being out of health just then, had been persuaded by his lady to refrain, for once, from the bone-breaking pastime that he loved so well; but his place was well filled by his three athletic nephews, who, young as they were, were already famed for miles round as among the best lances of Brittany. All three had gallantly done their part in the conflict, overthrowing all who faced them; and the third opponent of Alain, the eldest (though a knight of proved skill and prowess), was hurled to the earth with such force that his shoulder was dislocated by the shock.

Having achieved this crowning feat, the young Hercules rode twice round the lists with all his wonted arrogance, saluting the duke and duchess and other titled spectators with the air of one who thought himself as good as any of them.

Well might he be so proudly exultant, for only four knights were now left in the lists to encounter him and his two brothers, and the prize seemed already within his grasp.

But few wiser sayings have ever been uttered than the good old proverb which warns men against counting their chickens before they are hatched; and an obstacle of which he little dreamed lay between the young swaggerer and the distinction that he so boastfully accounted his own. Just

as he turned to ride back to the end of the lists for what he expected to be his final course, the day's programme was suddenly disturbed by a startling and unlooked-for interruption.

From the far end of the wide meadow in which the lists had been set came clearly through the still air the sound of a trumpet, waking all the echoes with a ringing blast of defiance.

All eyes were instantly turned with eager curiosity in the direction of a sound betokening the coming of some new champion to take part in the contest, and in another moment a horseman in full armour, with the visor of his helmet closed, was seen making his way slowly through the crowd, which opened, as if by word of command, to give him passage.

The new-comer was alone, save for the single attendant who had sounded the trumpet; and he, in direct contradiction of established usage, wore no blazonry or distinguishing badge of any kind, being simply clad in a long grey mantle, with an overlapping hood that hid his face.

But, strange as was the appearance of the servant, that of the master was stranger still.

He was short of stature, but his massive build and vast shoulder-breadth gave a promise of surpassing strength, amply borne out by the unusual weight of the shield and lance that he carried. The shield itself was wholly blank, having neither device nor motto. The stranger's armour was

black as night from head to heel, as was also the horse that he rode; and, with his barred visor and sombre panoply, there was in his whole aspect something so gloomy, grim, and almost unearthly, that a thrill of superstitious awe pulsed through the gazing crowd, and reached even the more exalted spectators around the duke's throne.

The unknown warrior never uttered a word, and this ominous silence added to the chilling effect of his sudden and gloomy apparition. But his attendant blew a second blast, and proclaimed aloud that his master had made a vow to St. Yves of Brittany to keep the lists that day against all comers, and craved permission of the most high and mighty Duke John to discharge his vow.

Such vows, and others more irrational still, were too common in that age of chivalrous extravagance to surprise any one, and the duke at once assented, though secretly convinced that this bold stranger had little chance of holding his own against seven of the best knights in Brittany.

But not so thought the most experienced judges present. Apart from the stranger's show of vast bodily strength, the skill with which he handled lance and horse argued no ordinary power of managing both, and a dead hush of expectation sank over the whole multitude as the unknown was seen to take his place in the lists.

He was instantly confronted by one of the four knights who were about to encounter the St. Yvon

brothers, and the two hurtled together in the midst of the open space with the rush of two conflicting whirlwinds.

The unknown staggered slightly, and his steed was thrown back on its haunches; but his opponent was hurled from his seat like a stone from a sling, with a crash that echoed all round the lists.

A second and a third knight rode out to meet this terrible jouster, only to share the same fate; but the fourth was a more formidable champion—no other than Olivier de Clisson, whose name in after-years won a dreadful pre-eminence in the wars of that grim period as one equally without fear, without faith, and without mercy.

De Clisson was already famed as one of the most redoubtable jousters of Brittany, and when he was seen to ride forth against the nameless cavalier, every one expected to see the latter go down like a ninepin.

The crash of their meeting was like the rending of an oak, and for a moment it seemed as if both had fallen, for each man bent backward till he all but touched the flanks of his horse; but both instantly recovered themselves, and, wheeling their steeds, rode back to their places, and took fresh lances for a second course.

The burst of applause with which the spectators hailed this well-contested encounter was plainly given more to the unknown than to Clisson; for, having fully expected to see the former fall before

Olivier's charge, their admiration was all the greater for the strength and skill with which he had foiled it.

De Clisson, already chafed by this unexpected check from a nameless opponent, was so enraged at the clamorous applause which greeted it, that he lost all his coolness just when it was most needed, and gave the stranger an advantage which the latter was not slow to use. A quick movement of his shield dexterously turned aside the terrific shock of the Breton's lance, while his own, striking Olivier full on the breast, bore him fairly backward to the ground.

This time the lookers-on were too much amazed to utter their wonted shout; but Clisson's men-at-arms were heard to mutter hoarsely to each other—

"This champion must be the Evil One himself; for since he first couched lance, our young lord hath never been overthrown by mortal man."

Only the three St. Yvon brothers were now left to dispute the prize with this unknown warrior; and they might have been expected to consider that a jouster who had overthrown De Clisson himself would be a match for the best of them. But their defiant bearing showed that even this formidable proof of the stranger's prowess had not shaken their swaggering self-confidence; and, as if in sheer bravado, the first who came forth to meet the Black Champion was Huon, the youngest and least powerful of the three.

The unknown himself evidently felt this slight, for his gauntleted hand clenched itself as if it would crush the strong metal to powder, and the way in which he settled in his saddle told that he meant to make himself felt in earnest.

Both lances flew crashing into a thousand splinters; but through the whirling dust of the charge Huon's helmet was seen to fly from his head high into the air, and he himself, after swaying dizzily to and fro for an instant, sank helplessly from his saddle to the earth.

Raoul growled a curse through his barred helmet, and pressed forward to avenge his fallen brother; but the terrible challenger (who seemed to gather fresh strength from every new course) met him with so fierce a shock that it smote down horse and man.

Alain, the eldest, was now left alone, and between him and the Black Champion lay the honour of the day.

As the unknown took his place for this final combat it was noticed that he bent his head forward, and seemed to look keenly at his opponent through the bars of his visor, like an eagle fixing its eye on the prey on which it is about to swoop; and all who saw the gesture judged that it boded no good to the swaggering Alain.

Nor were they mistaken. The two closed with the shock of a thunderbolt, and when the dust rolled away Alain was seen stretched on the earth,

B763

THE BLACK CHAMPION CONQUERS

groaning feebly—as he well might, for the fall had broken his collar-bone and two of his ribs!

The general shout which greeted his overthrow told that, in the judgment of the spectators, the young braggart had got no more than his due. But as the applause died away, from one of the galleries came a deep, strong voice, that of Sir Yvon du Guesclin—

"Ho, there! bring forth my war-horse quickly. I will try the mettle of this gay spark who hath overthrown my nephews."

Despite the entreaties of his lady, the hardy old knight was already on his feet to make good his words, when the unknown warrior (who still sat erect in his saddle, waiting to see if any new foe would confront him) lowered his lance to him in courteous salute.

"Honoured sir," said he, speaking for the first time, "for all others I have the lance of a warrior; for thee I have but the reverence of a son!"

And, opening his visor, he revealed to the thunder-struck father the harsh features of his despised son, Bertrand du Guesclin!

To paint the feelings of the beaten Raoul and Huon at this disclosure (Alain being luckily insensible) would be a hopeless task; for the one thing needed to make the shame of this public defeat unbearable was the discovery that it had been inflicted by their scorned cousin, "Ugly Bertrand."

But the lookers-on, whose enthusiasm had been wrought up to the highest point by the various turns of this strange scene, greeted its dramatic close with cheers that made the air ring, and brought a flush of joy to Bertrand's swarthy cheek. It was the first recognition of his real value that he had ever had—the first homage paid by the world to a name which was hereafter to fill all Europe with its renown, and to live as long as history itself.

Meanwhile Sir Yvon, having greeted his conquering son with a joyful hug that made every rivet of his armour crackle, led him up to the principal gallery, and, kneeling on one knee, presented him to the Duke and Duchess of Brittany.

"I give thee joy of him," said the childless sovereign, with a faint sigh. "I would I had such a son to succeed me. Thine is the prize, valiant youth; and my lady shall bind her own favour on thy crest, in token that thou art a true son of our native Brittany."

"Nay, I claim no prize from your highness," said Bertrand, with his usual bluntness. "What I did was for honour alone; and all I ask is your highness's pardon for having presumed to joust at sharp spears with knights, being as yet no knight myself."

"Nay, if that be all that is amiss, 'tis soon mended," said Duke John, kindly. "Kneel, brave

youth, and take the stroke of knighthood from my hand."

"From a more honourable hand I could never take it, noble duke," said the young hero, bowing low; "but, I pray you, let not Bertrand du Guesclin be called a knight of the tilt-yard for accepting, without having seen a stricken field, an honour that most men win with hard blows and much peril."

"Well spoken!" cried the duke, pleased with a chivalrous scruple so fully in the spirit of the age. "Take my sword at least, young sir. I warrant it will not be long idle in hands like thine!"

John III. spoke more truly than he could himself foresee. Even while he was speaking, King Edward's messengers were bearing over the sea their master's defiance to Philip of France, and the "Hundred Years' War" had begun.

"Thou art indeed my true son and heir," said the exultant Sire du Guesclin, again embracing his victorious son; "and now can I well believe yon prophecy that thou should'st be the glory of our house and of the whole realm of France, and that thy name should live in story while one stone of our castle stands on another." *

The term thus specified was fated to be much

* The resemblance between this authentic exploit of our hero and the famous tournament scene in "Ivanhoe" (which it may perhaps have suggested) is too obvious to need pointing out.

shorter than good Sir Yvon's feudal pride would have thought possible. The traveller who now flies in one day from Paris to the heart of Brittany on the wings of a smoke-breathing dragon, of which the fourteenth century never dreamed, sees near the railway-station of Broons no vestige of the birthplace of Brittany's greatest champion; and, but for the monument with which Breton patriotism has marked the spot, might let it pass unnoticed and unknown.

CHAPTER IX

Into the Dragon's Jaws

"Draw back thy head into the leaves, wilt thou, fool? The glitter of that morion would scare our birds if they fly this way, to say nought of thine ill-favoured visage, that looks like a dog robbed of a bone!"

"Draw back thy long tongue betwixt thy teeth, I counsel thee, lest I shorten it with my dagger!"

"Come, no quarrelling when there is work in hand," broke in a deeper growl, "or I brain ye both with my axe, which hath split skulls as thick ere now!"

The ghostly effect of these hoarse whispers, which mingled so strangely with the rush of the river and the moan of the rising storm, was deepened tenfold by the fact that no living thing was to be seen. It seemed as if the very leaves of the forest were whispering to each other some ghastly secret in the spectral twilight of that gloomy autumn evening, which was fast darkening into night.

A child might have guessed that men who were

lurking at such an hour in the thickets that overhung the ford of the Arguenon could be after no good; and in truth they did well to hide themselves, for it would have been hard to find, even in an age so fruitful in ruffians of high and low degree, a more villainous-looking rabble of cut-throats. On each and all of those various faces—swarthy, keen-eyed, brigand-like Spaniards; sinewy, black-haired, sallow Genoese; sturdy, yellow-bearded Flemings; and red-haired, hard-featured Scots—was stamped the same brand of savage violence, swaggering recklessness, and brutal debauchery that harmonized but too well with their blood-rusted weapons, dinted steel-caps, and slovenly dress—an unsightly mixture of tawdry finery and squalid filth.

In a word, one glance would have told the most careless observer that these wretches must be either brigands or pirates; and, in fact, they were both—land-thieves and sea-thieves by turns.

More than two years had passed since the tournament which saw the best knights of Brittany fall before the then untried lance of young Du Guesclin, and the great national storm which was then threatening had burst in all its fury. King Edward of England was marching through Picardy with thousands of English archers and men-at-arms at his back; war was raging along the whole border of Flanders; France was all tumult, disorder, and senseless division; and the Channel swarmed

with French, English, Flemish, and Spanish warships, and with the countless corsairs who, while pretending to belong to one side or the other, robbed both with strict impartiality, pouncing now on Sussex and Dorset, now on Normandy and Brittany, and taking their chance of being hanged like dogs if they met a stronger force than their own.

To this class belonged the worthies now in ambush at the ford, who had come on a plundering cruise up the little Breton river at the mouth of which lay their ship. They had been just about to go back to her with their booty, when they learned by chance that a lady of rank was returning that way with a small train from a visit to the shrine of Notre Dame de Lamballe; and the captain, whose savage face and brutal look matched well with the dragon crest of his battered helmet, had at once made up his mind to await and seize this new prize, whose ransom would certainly outweigh all the other gains of their expedition put together.

Just as the robbers drew back into their covert, the last gleam of sunset was flashed back from the steel caps and lance-points of twelve stalwart men-at-arms, riding slowly down the hill toward the ford, with two female figures, whose dress showed them to be mistress and maid.

"Here is the ford at last, ill betide it!" growled a grim veteran who led the party—no other, in fact, than the Norman ex-bandit who had told to

Bertrand du Guesclin, three years before, the strange tale of Lady Tiphaine de Raguenel. "But night will be upon us ere we can reach Ploncoët."

"And what if it be, good Blaise?" said the taller of the two women, in a clear, sweet voice, that contrasted strikingly with the old spearman's harsh tones. "Surely thou, of all men living, fearest not wolves or robbers?"

"I fear nought earthly, noble lady, especially in the service of one so saintly as yourself; but you know these woods have no good name, and to pass through them after dark——"

And the rough soldier crossed himself with a trembling hand.

"Dark or light, what matter, since we are always in the hand of God?" said the lady, with a smile so bright and fearless that it seemed to light up her beautiful face like a saint's crown of glory. "What have we to fear, so long as we are doing His will? But perhaps," she added archly, "thou art loath to venture into the haunted forest with one whom men call 'Tiphaine the Fairy.'"

"You do but jest, lady!" cried Blaise, with sudden fierceness. "Let any man, be he knight or churl, dare to say in my hearing that the noble demoiselle Tiphaine de Raguenel is akin to sprites or fairies, or aught else but the holiest angels of heaven, and I will so deal with him that——"

That challenge was never finished. A sudden crash shook the black, shadowy thicket; a wolfish

yell broke through the deepening gloom; there was a tramp of feet and a clash of steel, and the Raguenel men-at-arms found themselves suddenly attacked on all sides at once!

But, few as they were, these men were all cool and practised soldiers, and, though not looking to be surprised at that exact spot, they had fully expected an attack ere reaching their halting-place. Closing sternly round their young mistress, they faced their swarming foes, who were thirty to twelve, as bravely as men could do.

Steel rang on steel, man grappled man, blows rained at hap-hazard in the darkness, and death came blindly, none knew whence or how. The heavy trampling and hard breathing of the combatants amid the ghostly gloom showed how fiercely the fight was contested. More than one ruffian who had thought this handful of men an easy prey, fell writhing in the dust, and, for a few moments, arms and discipline balanced superior numbers.

But the pirate captain was not a man to be lightly baulked of his prey. Growling a curse too horrible to be repeated, he thrust himself into the thick of the fight, and came hand to hand with Blaise himself, who stood like a tower before the daughter of his lord, shielding her with his own body. A stamp, an oath, a clang of steel, a quick, convulsive gasp, and the brave old Norman lay at Tiphaine's feet, with his life-blood gushing through his iron-grey hair.

But ere the final blow could fall, the girl thrust herself between the murderer and his victim, and, standing over the fallen man, waved back the pirate's dripping blade with her bare hand as boldly as if she were invulnerable.

"Begone, impious men!" she cried, with stern and solemn emphasis. "Will ye peril your souls by molesting the pilgrims of God? Too much blood have ye shed already; shed no more, I charge ye! Go and repent, ere it be too late!"

The murderers recoiled in sudden awe, and even their ferocious leader himself wavered and hung back for a moment.

Then, through that dead hush of dismay, broke a voice mighty as a trumpet-blast—

"Notre Dame! Notre Dame! to the rescue!"

Mingling with that shout came the thunder of charging hoofs, and a single rider, in black armour, burst into the midst of the ruffianly throng, with closed visor and levelled lance.

Down went the first robber who met that terrible charge, pierced through steel and bone and body, till the good lance stood out a full yard behind his back. Ere the next man's uplifted sword could descend, the black rider's battle-axe flashed and fell, and sword and hand dropped in the trampled dust together. With a crash like the fall of an oak, the terrible axe smote the head of a third ruffian, who fell dead where he stood, cloven through steel-cap and skull to the teeth.

"It is Monseigneur St Michael, the Prince of Angels!" shouted the Raguenel men, with one voice; "he is sent to our aid by Our Blessed Lady herself. At them, comrades! Heaven fights for us!"

The same conviction pulsed like an electric shock through the terrified corsairs, and, giving up all thought of resistance, they turned to fly, some even flinging away their arms as they ran.

But it was too late. Before them was a rushing river, behind them the avenging swords of their pursuers; and few, very few, ever reached the boats. Two were cut down while actually springing on board, and a third, missing his leap, fell headlong into the water, and was dragged down by the weight of his armour to rise no more, shrieking in vain for the help which no one had any thought of giving; for, in an age when men were daily falling by each other's hands in scores and hundreds, what mattered one life more or less?

But the unknown champion whose prowess had turned the fray, where was he? Standing motionless among the dead, like one spellbound, glancing in wondering awe from the livid features of the last man that he had struck down (no other than the pirate captain himself) to the calm, sweet face of the lady he had rescued. At last, as if half-stifled by his own contending emotions, he threw open his visor; and at sight of the face thus revealed,

one of the wounded Raguenel men, who lay near, muttered tremulously—

"Had I not heard him utter a holy name, I had assuredly taken him for the Evil One himself!"

But just then the dying Blaise, with that sudden return of perfect consciousness which is so often, in such cases, the immediate forerunner of death, looked up with a glance of joyful recognition at the grim visage that frowned from beneath the black warrior's helmet, and cried with the last effort of his failing strength—

"Messire Bertrand du Guesclin! Then is my lady's prophecy made good, and the hour of my death hath seen the coming of our deliverer. God's blessing be on him!"

And, with that blessing on his lips, the stern old spearman sank back and died.

"He is gone!" said Lady Tiphaine, looking down with a sigh on the rugged face that would never move again. "Truer heart never beat; God rest his soul. Noble knight," she added, turning to her rescuer, "to whom I have too long delayed owning a debt of gratitude that I can never repay, art thou in very deed Sir Bertrand du Guesclin, who did his devoir so manfully in the tournament at Rennes two years agone, and overthrew all comers?"

"Knight am I none as yet," said the future hero of Brittany, with a slight flush; "but I am he of whom thou art pleased to speak so far beyond

his deserving. Tell me, I pray, art thou a lady of mortal birth, or that holy one whose name was my war-cry even now?"

"Nay, give not such honour to mine unworthy self; I am of mortal birth, and they call me Tiphaine de Raguenel. Why tak'st thou me for one from heaven?"

"Because," said the young noble, solemnly, "I saw thee, years agone, in a dream sent from God."

Then he told briefly the strange vision that had presented to him, on the memorable night of his first meeting with the pilgrim-monk, a lady whose appearance matched in every point her who now stood beside him, trampling down a dragon with a human face, which was that of the slain pirate at their feet!

"And then," he ended, "meseemed this lady who wore thy semblance set a laurel wreath on my head, and hailed me as the champion of France."

Into the girl's large bright eyes, as he spoke, crept a shadow of sudden awe; but with it came a glow of deep and solemn joy.

"And when was this vision?" she asked eagerly.

"On the Eve of St. John, five years since."

"This is in very deed the hand of God," said Tiphaine, solemnly. "Five years since, on the Eve of St. John, I beheld in a dream one in thy likeness, and methought a voice from heaven bade

me crown him as the deliverer of our oppressed land from all her foes. Hail to thee, champion of France! Let thy war-cry henceforth be as it hath been this day, 'Notre Dame!' in proof that thou art truly the soldier of heaven; and let this sacred rosary, brought by a holy pilgrim from Mount Carmel, hang on thy neck from this day in token that God is with thee for the deliverance of France, for alas! she standeth in sore need of it."

CHAPTER X

The Wages of Judas

Too truly said the prophet-lady of Raguenel, that France stood then in sore need of a deliverer. For now burst on the ill-fated land the full fury of that tremendous storm of calamities that was to rage over it for well-nigh a century to come, till its utter desolation and misery antedated the worst horrors poured out upon Germany during the long agony of the Thirty Years' War ; and the terrified monks who watched from their quiet cloisters the flood of ruin and death that seemed to be overwhelming the whole world outside, whispered to each other that the Last Day must be at hand, and quoted tremulously the only words strong enough to describe adequately a period so fearfully disastrous—

"For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not from the beginning of the world unto this time, no, nor ever shall be."

While the French nobles were quarrelling with each other, and all with the king, and the trampled French peasants were hating and cursing both

parties alike, an English army was fighting its way into the heart of France, burning, slaying, and plundering wherever it came; and, profiting by this universal disorder, pirates ravaged every coast, and robber bands wasted every province.

Then came the fatal field of Crecy, where the proudest nobles of France fell like autumn leaves before the shafts of English archers, and the dead left by the conquered outnumbered thrice over the whole army of the conquerors. And then King Edward's iron grasp closed on Calais, and all the valour of John de Vienne and his brother heroes failed to save from the invader that fairest jewel in the crown of France.

But the brightest crown of that great historical martyrdom was won neither by knight nor by noble, but by a peaceful burgher, Eustache de St. Pierre, who, with five others as brave and devoted as he, went forth to the terrible conqueror with the halters of doom about their necks, and bade him work his will on them, if he would but spare their city and its people. But though the great king's chivalrous spirit, and the prayers of his gentle and beautiful queen, saved these self-doomed martyrs from death, their town was French no longer; and for more than two centuries the gate of France was in English hands, ever ready to fling it open for the passage of their destroying armies, till, in God's good time, the ill-gotten spoil was torn from the spoiler, and the sternest and cruellest of

English queens died broken-hearted at the news that Calais was a French city once more.

And after this came woe on woe—war, pestilence, famine, robbery, and murder — till the misery of France rose to a height best described in the terrible words of one who had himself seen it—

"In goode sooth, the estate of the whole realme of Fraunce was thenne most miserable; and, looke wheresoever one myghte, there appeared nought save an horrible face of disorder, povertie, desolacioun, solitarinesse, and feare. The lean and bare labourers in the countrie did terrifie even theeves themselves, who founde nought lefte for them to spoyle save the carkasses of these poore starvynge creatures, wandering miserably uppe and downe like unto ghostes drawn foorth of theyr graves. The leaste farmes and hamlets were foortifyde by robbers of alle naciouns, eche one stryvinge to doe his worste; and alle menne of warre were well agreed in this, to despoyle to the utmoste everie husbandman and everie merchaunte; insomuche that the verie cattell in the fieldes, growing used to the sownde of the 'larum-bell (whiche was the signe of an enemie's comynge) wolde of themselves runne home withouten any guide, by reason of this accustomed miserie."

On a gloomy evening toward the close of November, 1348, sat at a table littered with parchments, in an upper room of Westminster Palace, a handsome, stately man in the prime of life, with so

striking a look of power and command in his large, deep, thoughtful eyes and broad, noble forehead (over which the long dark hair was waxing thin from the constant pressure of his helmet) that few men would have needed to be told that this was King Edward himself.

There he sat, the man for whose sake great kingdoms were being blasted with fire and sword, and thousands dying daily in the fierce shock of battle, or by the slow agony of famine and disease. Strong, wise, brave, comely, famed alike as king, statesman, general, courtier, and man-at-arms, he had power to do more good, and, alas! used that power to do more evil, than any other man of his time. Little could he then foresee, in the heyday of his might and the splendour of victories at which the whole world stood amazed, that, less than thirty years later, the curses of all Western Europe and the cold indifference of his own neglected people would follow to his grave an old, worn-out, childless, broken-hearted man, stripped of nearly all his hard-won conquests, and robbed on his very death-bed by a worthless favourite.

There was a knock at the door, and a richly clad chamberlain said with a low bow—

"My lord king, Sir Aymery de Pavia of Lombardy, governor of Calais, whom your grace was pleased to command hither, awaits your pleasure."

The great king started slightly, and over his noble face flickered for a moment a smile more

stern, and menacing, and terrible, than his blackest frown, but he only said—

"Bid Sir Aymery enter."

In came a tall, portly man in a rich suit of gilded armour, whose dark Southern face would have been strikingly handsome, but for the cunning, ever-shifting restlessness of the keen black eyes, and a sinister compression of the thin lips, suggestive of that ingrained Italian treachery which was then, and for many a generation after, the byword of all Europe in a bitter verse as true as it was severe—

> "When Italy from poison is,
> And France from treason, free,
> And war's not found on English ground,
> The world shall cease to be."

"Welcome to our trusty governor!" cried Edward heartily, as he held out his hand to the new-comer, who kissed it reverently. "Thou comest, I doubt not, worthy Sir Aymery, to report all well with our good town of Calais; for how should it be otherwise than safe and thriving, in the care of so faithful and loyal a warder as thou art?"

It was strange to see the Lombard look so pale and troubled at this flattering welcome from the king's own mouth; but Edward went on without seeming to notice his confusion, though still watching him keenly.

"We have called thee hither, Sir Governor, to

ask thy counsel touching a certain matter of weight, knowing thee to be wise and trusty."

The knight, whose dry lips seemed to have lost all power of speech, replied only with a low bow.

"A certain lord of my court," resumed the king, "gave into the keeping of one who was his friend a jewel of great price, which he prized above all else that he had; and it came to his ears that this friend whom he trusted had pawned that gem to a cozening knave of France for twenty thousand crowns. What, think'st thou, should be done unto such a traitor?"

The Lombard's dark face grew white as ashes, and his limbs trembled under him.

"Ha! thou understandest!" cried the king, in a voice like the roll of distant thunder. "Aymery of Pavia, I have rewarded and honoured thee, and given to thy charge what I prized beyond aught save my wife and children; and how hast thou repaid me? By trafficking with my foes, and covenanting to betray to them my city of Calais! Can a Lombard gentleman sell his honour, and a Christian man his soul, for twenty thousand beggarly crowns, the Judas-wage that Geoffrey de Chargny was to pay thee? What canst thou say for thyself, ere I deal with thee as a convicted felon and traitor?"

"Mercy, gentle king, mercy!" shrieked the unmasked villain, throwing himself at Edward's feet, and clinging to them in an agony of entreaty. "All your grace saith is true, but there is still time

to break the bargain, for I have not yet, so help me Heaven, received one penny of the money!"

The king smiled in bitter scorn, for though he too often used such wretches without scruple for his own ends, an utter loathing of all that was mean and treacherous was ever strong in his bold English heart.

"Stand up, and hearken to me," said he, sternly. "Thou shalt return to Calais, and bear thyself to De Chargny as if nought had chanced. Tell him thou wilt be ready to deliver up the town on New Year's Eve, and on these terms I give thee thy life."

"And the—the money?" faltered Aymery, with a greedy glitter in his eyes that all his terror could not wholly repress.

"Keep it," said Edward, with a look and tone of such blasting scorn that even this heartless villain felt its sting, and cowered out of the king's presence so abjectly that he seemed actually to grow smaller as he went.

CHAPTER XI

A Midnight Battle

NIGHT had fallen over Calais on New Year's Eve, cold, gloomy, threatening; and around a blazing fire in an upper chamber of the great tower flanking the Boulogne Gate were gathered a group of stalwart young Englishmen in full armour, whose silver spurs told that they had already attained the rank of esquires, though they were not yet "dubbed knights."

"Marry, these Frenchmen will have such a regale this night as they little expect," said a tall youth, rubbing his sinewy hands gleefully. "We English are hospitable folk, and care not how many guests come to taste our New Year's cheer; but methinks these gallants will find it somewhat hard for their French teeth!"

"They are minded, doubtless," laughed another, "to break their fast in Calais town on the New Year morn; and so indeed they shall—as prisoners!"

"Under whose banner fight we to-night, brother Hugo?" asked a slim, handsome lad of his

neighbour, whose comely face was a singularly exact copy of his own.

"Under the pennon of Sir Walter de Manny," replied his double, "a good and gentle knight, who is ever to be found where hard blows are going. Under such a one we may well hope to win spurs of gold. Methinks we have been esquires long enough—ha, brother Alured?"

The speakers were no other than the twin-brothers, Alured and Hugo de Claremont, who were greatly altered since they had sat at meat with Sir Yvon du Guesclin, years before.

Still retaining their wonderful likeness to each other, the dainty boy-pages had grown into tall and stalwart cavaliers, who had proved their courage in many a hard fray. On the field of Crecy they had been made esquires; and they now hoped, young as they were, to win knighthood in the coming fight.

"Would that the fray could begin at once!" cried Alured, impatiently, "ere our honoured uncle hath time to damp us with one of his wonted homilies against over-boldness! Methinks it would fit him better to urge us on than to warn us back."

In fact, their good uncle, Sir Simon Harcourt, was never weary of warning his hot-blooded nephews against rashly running into danger—which was very kind of him, considering that their death would have made him one of the richest landed proprietors in England. But, by some

unlucky chance, the good knight's admonitions were always given in such a way as to irritate the fiery youths into perilling their lives more recklessly than ever.

"Now, I bethink me, Claremont," broke in one of his comrades—"I say not 'Alured' or 'Hugo,' for never can I tell to which of the two I speak——"

A general laugh greeted the jest (such as it was) in which the twins good-humouredly joined.

"I say, then," resumed the speaker, "that it is full time for the fulfilment of the prophecy concerning you twain, which was to come to pass in a year and a day."

"A prophecy?" echoed three or four voices at once.

"Marry, even so—and a rare one," laughed Alured de Claremont. "I thank thee, Beauchamp, for reminding me of it, for in sooth I had forgotten it myself. This is the tale, comrades, if ye care to hear it—

"Just a year agone to-day, my uncle rode out hence with a part of his train (among whom were my brother and I) to see if the Frenchmen were stirring, and if there were any sign of their coming against us from St. Omer. All day we rode on without seeing aught—for the whole country-side was wasted till it lay utterly desolate—neither house nor barn, neither man nor beast.

"At last, just as the sun was going down, two

men came toward us, the one habited like a grey friar, the other in the dress of a lay brother of the order; and the moment we caught sight of the monk's face, we all knew him at once (for, in truth, he is not one to be lightly forgotten) for that same Brother Michael whom men call the Pilgrim of God, and whom we had seen long since at Dinan, where he saved from the boiling cauldron one doomed to die.

"Our uncle rode forward to greet him, and ask for news; and while they spake together, Hugo and I noted that this lay brother who was with him had the look of a simpleton, and was, belike, some crazy fellow whom the good monk had taken to him for charity's sake. So we began to make our sport with him, asking him jestingly of this and that; but he looked on us right gravely and sadly, as if such game liked him not, and then he spake to us in rhyme, like any masquer in the show of St. George and the Dragon. How ran the words, Hugo?"

And his brother repeated the following lines—

"Give ear, ye twain who mock at me,
And heed the words I say;
For every word shall come to pass
Within a year and a day.

"One night ye two together shall go
To hunt on a waste wild moor;
And out of twain shall one come back,
And his hands shall not be pure.

"His hands shall not be pure, I wot,
But stained with ruddy smear,
With ruddy smear of good red blood
That is not the blood of deer!"

A chilling silence followed the gloomy prediction, every word of which all the listeners (reckless jesters as they were) firmly believed. At last Beauchamp said—

"And this befell, say'st thou, just a year agone to-day? Then must the bode be fulfilled ere to-morrow's sunset! Now, God forbid it should mean that one of ye twain must die in to-night's battle!"

"Why not?" cried Hugo, recklessly. "How can a man die better, since die he must? Let who will die or live, England shall win the day! Fill yet another cup of Gascon wine, comrades (one thing, at least, in which France hath the better of us), and let us drink to the fortune of England!"

The rest answered the pledge, but less heartily than usual; for this sudden burst of wild gaiety from that quiet and sober lad seemed to them all an even more sinister omen than had he been silent and dejected; and Beauchamp whispered gloomily to his next neighbour that Hugo must surely be "fey" (doomed).

The same confident assurance of victory in the coming fray filled the hearts of the sturdy English archers and men-at-arms in the guard-room below.

"Let 'em come if they will, these braggart

Frenchmen!" cried Harry Woodstall, of Winchester. "They are great at boasting, but big words break no bones. If they have a mind to taste our English steel once more, e'en let 'em, though methinks they had a bellyful on't on Crecy Field—hey, Dickon?"

"By'r lady, thou say'st sooth, Hal. Ha, lads! I pity such of ye as were not there, for 'twas a right goodly fray! The French had archers, too, forsooth; a scum of Genoa rogues with arbalests (cross-bows) who thought, beshrew their hearts! to match us, and came on with a leap and a fell cry, as if to scare us like children with their clamour. Aha! then we let them see how the grey goose-wing can fly! Ye would have thought it snowed, lads, so thick flew our shafts among 'em. Down went Genoa bowman and French man-at-arms, down went belted knight and haughty noble, before the lusty cloth-yard shafts of Old England. When the broil was over, there lay dead on the French side thrice the number of our whole array, all told; and scarce a foot-archer of us all but had two or three prisoners, insomuch that we were in some sort constrained to kill such as were not worth ransoming, not knowing what else to do with them. I myself took a gay-plumed popinjay of Provence, be-ringed and be-jewelled like any court-lady, whose ransom kept my gipsire (purse) full for many a day."

"And thy mouth too, I'll be sworn, Dickon

Greenleaf," chuckled Mat Bowyer, of Kendal. "Trust thee for knowing where good cheer is to be had, whether to eat or to drink!"

"I were in luck, truly, were my mouth ever as full of good cheer as thine of foolish chatter, Mat Bowyer," retorted Nottingham Dick; and this sledge-hammer wit drew a general laugh from the audience, to whose capacity it was just suited.

"Long live our bold King Ned!" shouted Woodstall, "and may he ever have some good war in hand!"

A score of deep voices hoarsely echoed this humane toast.

"Amen!" said Mat Bowyer; "he is the king for a bold fellow to thrive under."

"Ay, marry is he!" cried Dickon Greenleaf, heartily. "There is but one thing about him that likes me not; methinks a king of England should speak good plain English in place of yon mincing French, which is fitter for a magpie's mouth than a man's."

"What? what?" broke in several voices at once. "Rule thy tongue better, Dickon, lest it breed thee pain. Know'st thou not that it is treason to say aught against the king's grace?"

"I care not," said the bold archer, sturdily; "I bear an English tongue, that dares speak the truth before King Edward himself—God bless him!—and it is no treason, I trow, to wish that his grace had the luck to be able to speak his mind in honest English, like ourselves."

"And were I to say, 'Hang me up yon malapert knave for speaking ill of his betters,' would that be English enow for thee?" asked a deep voice behind.

Dickon turned with a start, and saw (or thought he saw) through a loop-hole just over his head, a face, the sight of which seemed to turn him to stone, and all his comrades likewise.

As it vanished, the spell was broken, and Greenleaf and half a dozen more flew through the doorway, and up three or four steps of the winding stone stair beyond. Then they stopped short in utter bewilderment, for no one was there!

"Get ye to your prayers, lads, one and all of ye!" said Dickon, solemnly, as he crossed himself with a trembling hand, "for the foul fiend himself hath been among us in the likeness of our king!"

It was drawing toward midnight, when a long line of shadowy horsemen came gliding silently as spectres (for every hoof was muffled) over the wide waste of bare moor between Calais and St. Omer; and ever and anon a faint gleam of steel, breaking the tomb-like blackness of the gloomy winter night, showed that these ghostly riders were all armed to the teeth.

"Little dream these English hogs of the New Year pageant that we have in store for them!" muttered a stalwart figure in the front rank, no other than Alain de St. Yvon, the eldest of Bertrand du Guesclin's swaggering cousins, who were now

knights of renown, and formed part of the train with which Sir Geoffroi de Chargny, the French commandant of St. Omer, was hastening to seize (as he hoped) the great fortress, for the betrayal of which he had covenanted with a deeper traitor than himself.

"Pity our good cousin, Ugly Bertrand, were not here to-night," said the second brother, Raoul, with a coarse sneer; "he would have a better chance to win the knightly spurs that he still lacks, than by scuffling with hired spearmen in the Breton forests."

"And if he *did* get his nose chopped off, or his eye knocked out by a chance blow in the *melée*," added Huon, the youngest, "it could scarce make him uglier than he is!"

"Young sirs," broke in a deep, mellow voice just behind them, "it is ill done to speak scorn of the absent, or to vaunt when the work is but begun. Trust me, ere this night is over, ye may all have more cause to pray than to jest."

None of the young knights made any answer to the rebuke, fiercely as they all chafed under it, for the speaker was Sir Eustace de Ribeaumont, the best knight in all France at that day.

They were now nearing the entrance of the narrow stone causeway that then formed, on that side, the only approach to Calais. Here it behoved them to ride slowly and warily; for on either side stretched, for several miles, a black and horrible

morass, half swamp and half quicksand, in the fathomless depths of which death lay lurking to devour any ill-fated wretch who might fall, or be thrust, off the firm road above.

Just ere they reached this perilous isthmus, Sir Eustace halted to advise the detaching of a strong force to hold the bridge of Neuillet in their rear, and thus secure a line of retreat if anything went wrong. From any other man, the fiery De Chargny, in his overweening confidence of success, would have laughed this cautious counsel to scorn; but the advice of such a captain as De Ribeaumont was not to be slighted, and he unwillingly agreed.

The dismal swamp was safely passed, and, just on the stroke of midnight, they halted at last before the Boulogne Gate of Calais, and saw above them the dim outline of the great tower, dark and silent as a tomb. Above or below there was neither sign nor sound of life, and the gate was still fast shut.

"Yon loitering Lombard is in no haste to open to us," growled De Chargny. "Were he half as cold as I am he would make better speed."

"No doubt he is making sure that the crowns are in full tale, and that no light one hath slipped in by chance," sneered Sir Pepin de Werre. "These Lombards are ever careful folk with money."

"Patience, fair sirs," said De Ribeaumont; "it is not yet midnight. Hark! there sounds the first stroke even now."

Slowly and solemnly the twelve strokes of

midnight boomed through the ghostly stillness, like the knell of those who were about to die. Hardly had the last toll echoed through the silent town, when there came a clang and a rattle as the gate was flung open, and, with a deafening shout of "Manny to the rescue!" a mass of armed men burst from the gloomy archway with the rush of a mighty wave right into the midst of the startled French!

Then began a fight such as the oldest warrior there had never seen. In the depth of the cold black gloom, with death hungering for them on either side of the narrow path on which they fought, the contending hosts closed and battled. To and fro swayed the fight like a stormy sea, "each man," in the grim words of the old chronicler, "doing such work as he might in the darkness"—friend often striking friend instead of foe, and death coming blindly, no one knew whence or how.

Brave Harry Woodstall, whose stout steel cap and harder skull availed nothing against the thunderbolt blow that cut him down, never knew that he had got his death from the noblest sword in France, that of Eustace de Ribeaumont. Poor young Beauchamp, who had hoped to win fame and knightly spurs by measuring himself with De Chargny, gained his wish and his death-wound with it. By the hand of Sir John Chandos, "the flower of England's chivalry," fell gay young Pepin

de Werre, laughing as he died. Sturdy Mat Bowyer was smitten through bone and brain by Alain de St. Yvon, but the next moment his slayer fell dead beside him, crushed by the terrible mace of Walter de Manny; and as Raoul sprang forward to avenge his brother, Sir Peter Audley cut him down.

At the same instant Hugo de Claremont, who had come hand-to-hand with the third brother, Huon (little dreaming that the foe who faced him so stoutly was the blithe guest with whom he had once sat at meat in Motte-Brun Castle), was beaten to his knees, and would in a moment more have been crushed to death by the trampling feet around him, had not his brother Alured and two stout men-at-arms dragged him out by main force.

In truth, the peril of the sword was the least of all the dangers that the combatants braved that night. More than one brave knight on either side was trampled to death in the press; and many a gallant youth who had come into the fray that night with bright eye and bounding heart, eager to win fame and honour, was hurled headlong over the edge of the causeway into the deadly quagmire below, to sink inch by inch in its foul black slime and perish miserably, unaided and unknown.

So, amid clashing steel and streaming blood, shouts, groans, yells, curses, the moans of dying men, and the shrieks of those who were perishing in the horrible pit below, came in that New Year morn. A strange celebration, in truth, of the

blessed season of "peace on earth and good-will towards men"! but in an age when ceaseless bloodshed was held the only occupation worthy of Christian men, and when Christian kings sang praise to God for the destruction of thousands of their fellow-men by sword and fire and famine, that midnight butchery was "a very goodly and gentle passage of arms"!

All at once a sheet of flame leaped up through the blackness from the beacon-tower; and beneath its blood-red glare every feature of that wild scene started into terrible distinctness—the dark towers and battlements of the grim old fortress, the anxious watchers that crowded them, the dim expanse of sea behind, the whirl of furious faces and struggling arms and flashing weapons that filled the causeway, the black morass on either side, and the wild waste of dreary moor beyond all—a picture which no one who saw it ever forgot.

The light revealed that the battle was going against France; for though the French fought as bravely as men could do, all their valour was rendered vain by the complete surprise, the suddenness and fury of the attack, the superiority of prepared men to unprepared ones, and the narrowness of the causeway, which made their greater numbers not only useless, but harmful. Already they were beginning to recoil: but their stern leader, De Chargny, furious at being thus tricked and baffled, fought like a tiger, and, aided by the

terrible arm of Eustace de Ribeaumont, still bore up the war.

Just as the beacon flamed up, Sir Eustace, while hacking his way through that living jungle like a woodman slashing down brushwood, suddenly came face to face with a tall man in plain armour, whose prowess had already made him remarked alike by friend and foe, though he bore neither badge nor blazon.

"To me, Sir Eustace!" cried the stranger; "I would fain try my strength with thine."

"I know thee not," replied Sir Eustace, "but all such guests are welcome to De Ribeaumont. Come on, and let God send the victory as He will"

Without another word the two closed, and for some moments thrust and parry, stroke and guard, followed each other as thunder follows lightning. At last the French sword fell like a thunderbolt on the stranger's crest, beating him down on his knee; but ere Sir Eustace could second his blow, the other sprang lightly up once more.

"St. Denis! thou art a good knight!" cried the French hero, with all the chivalrous admiration of one brave man for another. "Wilt thou yield thee to my mercy?"

"'Yield' is a word that I know not," said the unknown, simply; and to it they went again like giants.

But a rush of fighting men parted them, and the stranger, reeling beneath another tremendous blow,

would have been thrust off the causeway to die in the foul morass below, had not a strong arm upheld him, while a gruff voice said in his ear—

"Hold up, your worship, and to it again; yon Frenchman is a good blade, but you will match him yet."

"Thanks for thy timely aid, my brave lad of England," said the knight. "But for thee, I had been fairly sped. By what name shall I remember thee?"

"Dickon Greenleaf of Nottingham, an' it like your worship."

"I will not forget it," said the unknown, with a low laugh, which thrilled the stout archer's nerves so unpleasantly that he instinctively made the sign of the cross.

Just then the too familiar war cry of "St. George for England!" broke out behind the combatants, and told the dismayed French that they were completely hemmed in. The master-mind that guided every turn of that night's wild work had not forgotten the Neuillet Bridge, and the English force sent to seize it had, after a fight as fierce as that on the causeway itself, effected its purpose, thus cutting off the retreat of De Chargny's men, who, already weary and out of heart, now gave way altogether.

"Yield, noble Sir Eustace! The toils are around thee and thine," cried the unknown, who had just come hand-to-hand with De Ribeaumont

for the third time. "Thou hast done thy devoir this night as never man did yet, and it is no shame to a good knight to yield when escape is none."

"Thou say'st sooth," said the gallant Frenchman, with a faint sigh, "and I shame me not to yield to one like thee. I render me true prisoner, rescue or no rescue, and therewith give I thee my sword."

"Not so," cried the unknown, gently putting back the offered weapon. "Sin and shame were it, I trow, to deprive so good a knight of the sword that none else can wield so well. Keep thy good blade, noble sir, and may'st thou draw it on many a more fortunate field than this!"

So chivalrous a compliment, from a foe of such prowess, well-nigh consoled the brave Frenchman for his defeat; but none the less was he eager to learn who this warrior could be, who had not only matched his hitherto invincible sword, but had mastered it too. On that point, however, he was not left long in doubt, for, as his captor led him in through the gate, the light from within fell right on the latter's now unhelmeted face, and Sir Eustace started to see that his nameless conqueror was no other than King Edward himself!

CHAPTER XII

Crowning an Enemy

THE news of the king's presence flew from mouth to mouth, and stirred the whole garrison to a tumult of joyful surprise, for it had till then been a secret to all but a chosen few. In a flash of that chivalrous daring which was so marked a feature of his strangely mingled character, Edward and his renowned son, the Black Prince, had come over from England in disguise, to fight as simple knights under the banner of Sir Walter de Manny; and while the English made the air ring with shouts at a feat so much after their own heart, the gallant French knights who had been made prisoners had at least the comfort of feeling that they had been overcome by no unworthy hand.

They had even better cause to think so ere the day ended, for Edward's chivalrous courtesy to his captives was one of the few bright spots in that dark and cruel age. They were bountifully supplied with food, which they sorely needed after that night's terrific struggle, and the long and hungry march that preceded it. Their wounds

were dressed by the king's surgeons, and the more severely hurt removed to his own quarters, where they were kindly cared for and furnished with all they needed; and one and all, by Edward's special order, were provided with new clothes in place of their battered armour.

Having attended the public thanksgiving in the great church of the town, the king summoned to his presence in the castle hall a number of young English esquires who had done bravely in the fight, and knighted them with his own hand. Among these were, to their great joy and pride, the Claremont twins, who had surpassed themselves that night, and made prisoner a Flemish captain of note.

"Royal father," said the Black Prince, bowing gracefully, "I pray your courtesy to give me leave to attach these two young knights to my train, where they will doubtless acquit them as good men and true."

Edward cordially assented, and the prince, turning to the new-made knights with that frank and manly courtesy to which, even more than to his splendid feats of arms, he owed his universal popularity, said pleasantly—

"Fair sirs, ye may have heard that I am a master who never leaveth good workmen idle; and such do I hold ye to be. I pray you, then, to hie down to the shore with such men-at-arms as ye have, and keep heedful watch and ward all this day,

lest the corsairs who haunt the narrow seas should avail them of the confusion that ever followeth a battle, and land in their boats to rob and kill."

Away went the brothers and their train, rejoicing alike in being so soon entrusted with that important mission by the prince himself, and at the great warrior's kindly courtesy; but, not wishing to lose sight of their Flemish prisoner—the Flemings of that age being proverbially a very slippery set—they were fain to take him with them.

That night, by King Edward's special command, his French captives were bidden to a costly banquet in the great castle hall, and those who waited on them at table were the best knights of England and the Black Prince himself.

The meal over, into the hall came Edward III. himself, clad in rich cloth-of-gold, but with nothing on his head save a twisted chaplet of pearls.

Up the hall he came, with slow and stately step, halting at last by De Chargny, who was still chafing fiercely at the treachery that had so unexpectedly foiled his enterprise, and brought defeat and captivity on himself. The king fixed on him a look before which even the haughty noble's bold eyes sank abashed.

"Sir Geoffrey de Chargny," said Edward, in a tone of stern rebuke, "I have little cause to love you, who have thought to filch from me, in a time of truce, the town that I won with such labour and at such cost. Right glad am I that I have thus caught

you in the fact. You thought to gain the town cheaper than I did, by payment of a bare twenty thousand crowns; but I thank God that He has enabled me to foil you."

He passed on, while the fierce De Chargny, dumb with shame and fury, muttered through his clenched teeth a fearful vow of vengeance on the traitor Lombard, who, in a solitary chamber overhead, was greedily counting the Judas-wages for which he had bartered his honour and his soul. That vow was terribly redeemed a year later, when a shuddering crowd thronged the market-place of St. Omer, to see Aymery of Pavia torn limb from limb by wild horses.

But when the king neared his late adversary, De Ribeaumont, his frown vanished at once, and a smile like a sunbeam broke over his noble face.

"I give you greeting, good Sir Eustace," said he, frankly holding out his hand, "as the best knight of all; for never met I one who gave me so much to do, body to body, as ye have done this day; therefore give I you the prize of valour above all the knights of my court, by right sentence."

So saying, he untwined the string of pearls from his head, and put it about the neck of his gallant enemy.

"Bear this chaplet for love of me, noble sir, till a year be gone, and wherever ye come, tell all men I did give it you for your prowess this day; and

on these terms I quit you your ransom, and ye shall depart freely on the morrow."

The brave Frenchman acknowledged with a courteous bow a compliment so truly in the noblest spirit of chivalry; and the king passed on to the other prisoners, for each of whom he had a kind word. Then back he came to the centre of the hall, and, standing between his son and Sir Eustace, said aloud—

"One debt have I yet to pay, and it befits every man to hold a just accompt at the outset of a new year. Ho there! let some one call hither Dick Greenleaf, an archer of Nottingham."

In came honest Dick, slouching into the brilliant circle with a very unwonted shyness and confusion on his bold, sun-browned face.

The king fixed a piercing glance on him, and said, with a well-feigned air of harshness, in such English as he could command—

"Hark ye, Master Greenleaf, I have somewhat to say to thee. Dost thou bear ill-will to me, thy king, only because I speak not thy tongue as easily as mine own?"

"It was your grace's own self, then, who spake through yon loophole, and not the foul fiend in your likeness!" cried the stout yeoman, with intense relief. "St. George be my speed, but I am right glad on 't; for, since better may not be, I had rather, after all, fall into your grace's hands than the claws of the devil!"

At this equivocal compliment a laugh, which even the king's presence could not wholly repress, billowed through the listening ring.

"Gramercy for thy courtesy, good fellow," said the king, laughing as heartily as any one; "but if I talk like a Frenchman, thou hast seen that I can fight like an Englishman—ha?"

"Ay, marry, that have I!" said the archer, grinning gleefully. "'Fegs! it was a goodly sight to see your grace at cuffs with yon big Frenchman, whose sword fell on your crest like my old father's hammer on the anvil! But he found your grace too hard for him—no offence to you, Master Frenchman," added he, suddenly recognizing Sir Eustace, who replied with a kindly smile.

This time the laugh was universal, even the guards at the door joining in; and Edward himself (who, like other kings of that despotic age, vastly enjoyed an occasional lapse from the rigid etiquette that fettered his ordinary life) chuckled as he said, with a very transparent show of sternness—

"For all this, Master Dickon, our own ears have heard thee speak ill of us and our dignity. What say'st thou to that?"

"I say," replied the bold archer, sturdily, "that if your grace be the man I take you for, you will bear me no grudge for having an English tongue in my head, and speaking my mind as a free Englishman should do."

"Well spoken!" cried the king, heartily. "Thou

hast judged me aright, friend; and hadst thou spoken yet worse treason than to say I have not an English tongue in my head, thy good service on the causeway yesternight had atoned it all. Hold out thy hand."

The soldier extended a palm as broad and hard as a trencher, and Edward heaped it with gold pieces from his own purse.

"Now, may God bless and keep your grace!" said the archer warmly, as he withdrew; "and Heaven send your grace many more such goodly frays, and ever an archer of Merry England to back you in 'em all!"

CHAPTER XIII

A Red Stain

THE king's banquet was over, and night had fallen upon Calais; and the Black Prince, having himself made the rounds to see that all was safe in the fortress which had so narrowly escaped capture, was on the way to his own quarters, when a sudden burst of clamorous cries from the gate he had just left (the one facing the sea) made him stop short to listen, with a stern frown at such a breach of discipline.

"Go quickly, Simonson," said he to one of his attendants, "and see what means this unseemly clamour at a post guarded by English soldiers."

The man was absent but a minute or two, and the report he brought back was given in a few words; but as Prince Edward heard them, he changed colour as he had never done amid the crashing spears of Crecy.

"It cannot be!" he cried, with an excitement very rare in him. "Thou art distraught, man, or the fellow hath lied. It cannot be!"

"Not so, an it like your highness," said the

other firmly. "All they who kept the gate are in one tale of what he had said; and, for the man himself, he was in no case to lie, for he had fallen down in a swoon!"

"How, then, told he his tale so deftly?" asked the Prince of Wales, still doubting.

"He had but strength to gasp out those few words—being sore spent with the haste he had made to come hither and the fright he had had—and then down he fell as he lies now."

"Go see him cared for," said the prince, hastily; "and, hark ye! as soon as he is able to speak, bring him to me straightway, and let no man know it. I will look into this matter myself; and if it be as thou say'st, then must the Evil One himself be abroad upon the earth."

An hour later, back came Simonson with the man he was sent to bring—a stout Hampshire archer of the Claremont train, whose bravery had been conspicuous in the recent fight. But now the daring man seemed wholly mastered by terror. Thick beads of moisture hung on his tanned brow, his bold brown face was pale as death, and his lips quivered as if in a fit.

"Sit thee down, good fellow—thou art in no plight to stand," said the prince, kindly, as he pointed to a rude wooden settle in a corner of his plainly furnished room; for, like a true soldier, he scorned to bring city luxuries into the camp. "Sit, and speak plainly all thou hast to tell."

The great captain's cool, firm tone seemed to steady the scared man's shaken nerves, and he told his dismal tale more clearly than might have been expected.

In obedience to the prince's orders, he and his comrades had gone forth to patrol the beach against a descent of the hovering rovers; but hardly had they left the town, when they were joined by Sir Simon Harcourt and a score of his men.

At Harcourt's name the prince's look waxed graver, and the close attention with which he was listening seemed redoubled.

Sir Simon, so the archer said, had ridden to the head of the party, and, greeting his young nephews, stated his intention to share their duty that day, saying it would ill befit him to cower behind walls when they were in the field, and that, in a service of such peril, his experience might be of use.

"Ha!" said the prince, with peculiar emphasis. "What said thy young lords to that?"

"Methought it liked them ill, for Sir Alured looked passing grim, and Sir Hugo muttered somewhat of his being now of age to go abroad without a nurse; but I heard nought more, my place being in the rear with them that guarded our prisoner, the Flanderkin."

Then he went on to tell how, having broken up into many small parties in order to patrol as

wide a space as possible, they had scouted along the shore till late in the afternoon, without seeing any sign of mischief. At last he and three or four of his comrades caught sight of a suspicious-looking craft hovering in the offing, as if watching their movements.

"And then, an't please your highness, we took her for one of the sea-rovers for whom we were watching, and deemed it best to leave two of our band to mark what she would do, while I and other two made haste back to tell what we had seen. But when we neared the spot where we had left our young lords and the prisoner, on a sudden we heard voices raised as in anger, and lo! Sir Alured and Sir Hugo face to face on the sand-beach at hot words, each with hand on hilt as if in high wrath; and beyond them their Uncle Simon, riding fast away toward the town, having said (as we learned later) that he must go make his report to your highness, and crave your further orders."

"A wise engineer!" said the prince, with a bitter smile. "Having lit the match, he drew back warily ere the mine should explode. Well?"

"Then," faltered the stout bowman, "in a moment both swords were out, and the fray began. We all ran like madmen to part them; but——"

Here the brave man's overtasked firmness fairly gave way, and the fatal words that he tried to utter were lost in a convulsive gasp.

"Enough, good friend. I understand thee,"

said Prince Edward, kindly. "It was Sir Hugo, then, who fell. But what of the unhappy Sir Alured, whom God pity and forgive?"

"He dashed away as if pursued by the Evil One himself; and just then back came Sir Simon, who had seen from afar, belike, what had befallen."

"Ha!" cried the prince again, in the same peculiar tone as before.

"Then shouted Sir Simon to us, 'What do ye, knaves, letting yon felon knight escape?' And he pointed after the traitor Flanderkin, who, seeing none left to guard him, was making his escape like a false rogue as he was, in spite of his plighted word. 'After him speedily, and see he escape ye not. I will follow my nephew.'

"As he spake thus, he turned and rode off after Sir Alured, while we chased the Fleming and caught him; for we must needs obey Sir Simon's command, though certain of us had our own thoughts of the matter."

"And what were thy thoughts of it?" asked Prince Edward, turning suddenly on him, and looking him full in the face.

The rough soldier replied only by shuffling uneasily with his feet, and twisting his fingers nervously into each other, while his eyes shrank away from the piercing glance fixed on him.

"I ask thee, friend," repeated the prince, in a tone which there was no gainsaying, "what were thy thoughts on this matter? And I charge thee,

as thou art loyal subject and true Englishman, to answer me truly."

"Well, if your highness will have it," blurted out the yeoman, in sheer desperation, "I thought, as did others beside me (may God forgive us if we were wrong!), that Sir Simon, being next heir to the broad lands of Claremont, had bred a quarrel 'twixt his nephews, hoping that if they slew each other, lands and goods should be his without more ado."

A gloomy silence followed the utterance of this ghastly suspicion, broken at last by the Black Prince himself.

"Be not troubled, good fellow," said he, laying his hand kindly on the other's shoulder. "Thou hast spoken what thou holdest to be the truth, as every man is bound to do; and if thou art mistaken, why, so might any man be in like case. But what befell next?"

"We caught the rogue Flanderkin and brought him back with us, as we were bidden; and then, knowing no better counsel, it seemed best to our esquire that while he mustered the men as they came back from their scouting, I should hie me to the town and tell what had chanced."

"Thou hast done well, and thy service shall not be forgotten. Go now and rest thee, for thou must have need of it. Take this from me, and let what thou hast said be a secret betwixt us."

The archer was hardly gone, when a messenger

came to report the return of the Claremont men-at-arms from their patrol under their oldest esquire, who had taken the command in default of his three superior officers.

Prince Edward at once summoned the esquire to his presence, but only to learn fresh details that made the dark story gloomier than ever.

Sir Simon had never come back from seeking his lost nephew. Nothing had since been heard either of him or the wretched fratricide; and when the men returned to the spot where the slain Sir Hugo's corpse had been left, there was no sign of it but a red stain on the cold, grey sand, whence a trail of dark drops led down to the water's edge, showing but too plainly that the pirate crew in the offing must have landed on seeing the coast clear, stripped the dead man of his rich armour, and then flung him into the sea!

"An ill end for so young and brave a knight!" said the Black Prince, with a sigh. "May God rest his soul, and have mercy on him who slew him!"

CHAPTER XIV

The Black Death

NEARLY five months had gone by since that black New Year night, and the fields and woods of Old England were bright with all the beauty of sunny May, when a small band of armed horsemen came riding slowly over the crest of a ridge looking down on the quiet, green valley, at the far end of which the low, square, dark-grey tower of a noble cathedral rose above the grassy meadows and glittering windings of its tiny river, sentinelling, like a guardian giant, the ancient town of Winchester.

The party consisted of a knight in full armour, his two esquires, and a dozen sturdy men-at-arms, who, when passing through this beautiful country in that bright sunshine, and actually in sight of their homes, after long absence and countless perils, might well have been expected to be radiant with joy. But it was not so. They rode in sullen silence, with gloomy faces and downcast eyes, which ever and anon shot by stealth a dark look at their leader, who wore the only bright face in the whole band.

Well might Sir Simon Harcourt look so joyful. Claremont Castle and its broad lands, which he had coveted so long, were his at last, by the death of his two nephews; for by this time Alured's death seemed as certain as Hugo's. Nothing had ever been seen or heard of the fratricide since the fatal night when his uncle came back alone from a fruitless search for him; and no one doubted that he had either been slain by French soldiers or prowling robbers, or had died by his own hand in a fit of frantic despair.

Hence Sir Simon (after waiting some months, as if to give time for the discovery of some proof that his lost nephew was still alive) respectfully asked leave of the king to cross over to England, and "put in order" (*i.e.* take as his own) the fair domain that was lying masterless; and Edward could find no cause for refusing.

Neither he nor his son had ever liked the man, toward whom both felt the instinctive repugnance of a high nature for a low one, even apart from the terrible shadow that had now darkened his name. But, whatever were their secret suspicions, they could prove nothing; and both alike shrank from putting an open stigma on one who was certainly guiltless in actual deed, and might possibly (sorely as appearances were against him) be guiltless in purpose too.

So Harcourt crossed the sea with a small train, landed at Southampton, and rode inland till almost

in sight of Claremont Castle, revolving in his mind schemes of selfish ambition, and either not seeing or not heeding the lowering looks of his followers.

But these brave men had good cause to look gloomy, apart from their dark suspicions of the wily and hard-hearted man who was now their master; for the whole land through which they were passing seemed smitten by the curse of Heaven. That terrific pestilence, known to history as the Black Death, which had wasted the whole continent of Europe during the two past years, had reached Britain at last. The shadow of death darkened all the land; and in the fair southern counties of Merry England, as in doomed Egypt of old, "there was not a house where there was not one dead."

Even their short march from the coast had already given them ghastly proof of the misery which, under all this glitter of victory and conquest, was gnawing the very vitals of England, and amply avenging the sufferings inflicted by her on France. Through the silent streets of Southampton corpse after corpse was being borne; and many houses stood empty, with open doors, not a soul being left alive within.

Hardly had they got clear of the town, when they met a man being led away to prison; and, on asking his crime, they were told that, being unable to find work in his native place, he had presumed to leave it and seek employment elsewhere, "which

thing," said the sheriff, with an important air, "hath been straitly forbidden by our lord the king, in a special statute framed this very year, commanding all craftsmen to remain in their own place, and be content with such wages as are given there; wherefore this contumacious rogue hath well deserved his doom!"

A little farther they passed through a small hamlet, without seeing a living thing in its voiceless, grass-grown street, in the middle of which two unburied corpses lay festering in the sun. Sir Simon, seeing (as he thought) a man leaning out of a window in the last cottage of all, hailed him; but there was no reply, and the knight, looking closer, grew pale as he saw the shrunken features and rayless eyes of the dead. There was no one left alive in the whole village!

About a mile beyond this place of death, they espied a large placard affixed to a post by the wayside, written in a stiff, official hand—for printing was still a century away in the unknown future.

Harcourt (who, like other gentlemen of his time, could neither read nor write, and was rather proud of it than otherwise) sent one of his esquires—a young prodigy who could actually read his own language—to decipher the notice, which was so thoroughly characteristic of that age as to be worth quoting in full—

"Bee it knowen unto alle menne hereby, that it hath beene ordayned by our lorde the kynge, of hys

grete goodnesse and mercie, that alle sturdie, myghtie, and valliaunt beggars, whych doe goe to and fro in thys realme, cravinge alms for theyr idlesse; the fyrst tyme they bee founde soe offendynge, they shall bee soundly scourged for a publicke ensample; the second tyme, theyr eares shall bee cutte off; and atte the thirde, theye shall incontinently bee hanged."

The reading of this fourteenth-century poor law was hardly ended, when by came a group of peasants, gaunt, haggard, tattered, half-starved, who, as they unwillingly made way for the knight and his train, scowled at him askance, and muttered between their teeth words of ominous sound.

"These be the fine folk," growled one, "who make us eat bread mingled with chopped straw, that they may have their cates and their spices."

"And send us to face rain and wind and cold in the field," said a second, "while they sit at ease in their fine houses!"

"And ere we put hand to our own crop," added a third, "we must plough their worships' fields, and reap and garner their grain; yea, and thrash and winnow it too; and all for nought—not one silver penny of fee!"

"Thou say'st sooth, Hob; slugs and caterpillars are they every one, who devour our labour, and do nought for themselves."

"Marry, thou art right, Will; the old saying is ever true—

"'When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?'"

"Ay, true it is; it will ne'er be a blithe world in Merry England till all the gentlemen are out of it."

If Sir Simon and his gay young esquires heard these ominous murmurs at all, they probably despised them as the mere idle growling of "a sort of discontented churls," little dreaming that this was the first muttering of that tremendous storm which, in the days of Edward III.'s weak and worthless successor, was to shake all England with the terror of "Wat Tyler's Rising."

The farther they went, the deeper grew the horror of that plague-stricken region. The jovial shout of the teamster, the merry whistle of the ploughboy, the blithe song of the housewife over her spinning-wheel, were heard no more. The few peasants still at work in the fields had the heavy, spiritless, hopeless look of men doomed to die; and when two wayfarers met on the high-road, they glanced nervously at each other's faces, as if expecting to see there the livid spot which was the herald of the fell destroyer.

Passing through the village of Shawford, Harcourt and his men found a Dominican friar (who had just buried with his own hands three or four victims of the plague whom no one else dared to touch) preaching to a throng of country-folk;

and the knight's crafty face changed slightly as he heard the preacher's text—

"Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine."

Slowly they rode down into the beautiful valley of the Itchen, and, passing under the stately trees that overhung the winding river (now in all the beauty of their fresh green leaves), mounted the farther slope, and saw before them the rich pastures and green woods of Claremont, beyond which the dark-grey tower of the ancient castle looked forth from its encircling lifeguard of noble trees.

"At last!" said Harcourt, half-aloud, as if his greedy joy at the possession of this splendid and long-coveted prize had for once overcome his wonted crafty caution.

At that moment a fearful cry, half howl and half shriek, burst from the thicket beside him, and through the crackling boughs broke a ghastly figure, with the marks of the pestilence terribly plain on its livid face, and only a few rags of clothing hanging loosely around its bony frame, which was so frightfully wasted that the scared spectators half thought they beheld a new-buried corpse starting from its grave.

The poor wretch was plainly at the point of death; but, filled with the strength of that madness which was a common symptom of the fell disease (usually impelling the wretched sufferers

to communicate the horrible taint to all whom they met), he sprang like a tiger at Sir Simon's unprotected face (for the knight had opened his visor to see his new domain more clearly), and bit him deeply in the right cheek!

In a moment the men cut him down; but the work was done.

"Bear his worship to yon cottage, and look to him," cried the elder esquire, as the knight reeled in his saddle and fell heavily to the earth; "I ride to Winchester for a leech."

Away he flew, as one who rides for life and death; but, with all his speed, he rode in vain.

Three days later, Sir Simon Harcourt died; and those who stood by his death-bed saw with secret horror that, to the last moment, his skeleton hands kept working themselves convulsively against each other, as if striving to wipe off some fancied stain.

So died the arch-plotter, in sight of the rich heritage for which he had played so foully, and which he never enjoyed; nor could he have found a fitter epitaph than the solemn text read over his grave by good William de Wykeham, the founder of Winchester College—

"This night thy soul shall be required of thee; then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?"

CHAPTER XV

A Night Alarm

"WELL, friend Gaspard, if these English wolves have the better of us in the open field, we are as good as they when it comes to defending towns. Six months, and better, have the rogues lain before our town, and not got it yet."

So spoke a Breton soldier to his comrade, as they stood on the walls of Rennes on a gloomy November evening in 1353, looking down on the countless white tents that shimmered ghost-like through the deepening gloom, and the lights that spangled the blackness like huge glow-worms.

Amid the great struggle between France and England, the rival claimants of the Duchy of Brittany, Charles of Blois and Earl de Montfort, had got up a little private war of their own. Most of the leading Breton knights (including Bertrand du Guesclin) supported Charles's cause, while England sided with the Earl; and Rennes being the most important town that held out for Charles, the English were doing their best to take it, though as yet in vain.

"They will have the town sooner or later, though, Pierre," said the elder soldier, despondingly; "for ere long we shall have nought to eat, unless we can chew pike-staves like mutton-bones, and swallow arrow-heads for New Year cakes!"

"Well, these English have no cause to crow over us on that score," cried his more hopeful comrade; "for, thou know'st, yon Picard who escaped from them to us yester-eve, brought word that the thieves had well-nigh spent their stores, and were at their wits' end to replenish them."

"It will end, then, in a match of who can starve the longest," said Gaspard, with a grim smile; "and at that game I fear them nought, for methinks we Bretons can hold out without food as long as any man alive."

"Ay, truly; and these cold nights that are coming will try the English rogues hard, encamped as they be in the open field."

"I fear it will ne'er come as far as that," put in a third man, who had just come up. "Heard ye not, lads, yon great shouting in the English camp but now? and know ye what it meant?"

"What meant it?" asked both at once.

"Marry, it meant that yon movable tower of theirs is at last ready to attack our walls, and by to-morrow's sunrise it will be upon us. Even so said a dog of an English archer who stood nigh the wall, and called to me but now in scorn,

'Make room in your sty, ye Breton piglings; the great sow is coming.'"

His hearers eyed each other in blank dismay, for in that age these formidable engines were the terror of every besieged garrison. The invention of gunpowder, though more than half a century old, had as yet made little difference in war; and not till a century later did the fall of Constantinople before the Turk's breaching-cannon show the full power of the new artillery. The chief mode of attack was still with high wooden towers, which (protected from fire by a cover of raw hides, and from stones by their sloping roofs and solid build) were pushed close up to the city walls; and while the men who filled the upper story sprang on the ramparts sword in hand, the sappers in the lower one made a breach or beat in a gate, thus combining both modes of assault, mine and escalade.

"If this be so," said Gaspard, "may God have mercy on us, for we shall find none from man."

He spoke too truly. In that iron age, though the lives of knights and nobles might be spared for ransom, those of common soldiers were held cheap as flies; and the slaughter of the whole garrison was in such cases so completely a matter of course, that the defenders of the doomed city already counted themselves dead men.

"There is no hope for us, in truth," growled the third man, "for five hundred men (and we number but that) cannot make good such a circuit of wall

against five thousand. We are lost, unless aid come from without, and I see not how that can be."

"It cannot," said Pierre, whose set, grim face, lit for a moment by the glare of the watch-fires below, showed how utterly he had given himself up for lost. "There is no army of friends at hand, and, without an army to back him, there lives but one man in Brittany this day who could break through yon English host, and he is far away."

"Thou mean'st our Bertrand du Guesclin. Would to Heaven he were here, for he alone would be worth an army."

"Ay, that would he!" cried the third Breton, forgetting his own peril in his simple, honest exultation at his countryman's prowess. "Well may they call him 'The Grim Knight,' for grim hath he truly been to his country's foes. Heard ye what he did at the siege of Dinan, a year agone? He was returning with his men from a sally against the English camp, and was already nigh to the town gate, having broken his way through their host, and all seemed safe for him, when suddenly he missed from his neck a rosary that he ever bare, the gift, men say, of the fair lady to whom he is betrothed, Tiphaine de Raguenel, whom they call 'the Fairy.'"

"And what did he?" asked both listeners at once.

"What did he? Why, he turned his horse, and back he dashed into the midst of the pursuing

English. One of their archer-knaves had already found the chain, and snatched it up; but scarce had he touched it, when his head was swept from his shoulders, and Messire Bertrand, turning on the others, smote them down with his axe as the hail beats down the corn. But the knaves laid on load stoutly, and sore was the fray, when up came one who seemed a captain among them, and cried, 'Shame on ye, lads! let the gallant gentleman pass free! for so good a knight deserveth all the honour we can pay him.' So the fray was stayed, and our Bertrand came safe to the town."

"Why, then," cried Pierre, in surprise, "there is some courtesy even among these English! But, having warred so long in France, belike they have learned good manners here."

"Doubtless," said Gaspard; "but we, at least, have no mercy to hope from them. Commend your souls to God, comrades, for we shall never, I trow, see another sun go down."

The same gloomy conviction was in the mind of every man in that doomed fortress; and, even in an age when men cast away their own lives or those of others as lightly as children their broken toys, the most reckless of these rough soldiers could not be wholly unmoved by the thought that, strong and bold as they stood there, full of life and health and daring, they would all, ere another sun went down, be lying cold and dead. Many a hard hand, still red with recent slaughter, was uplifted

to heaven that night in heart-felt supplication ; and many a rude man-at-arms strove to call to mind some long-forgotten prayer.

Slowly and wearily the dismal night wore on, and as dawn drew nigh, the sentinels on the walls, looking toward the English camp, strained their eyes and ears for any sign of the fatal assault that was to end all. The moon had set, and the only light was from the dying watch-fires ; but their faint glow sufficed to show to a keen-eyed young soldier on the tower above the Dinan Gate a strange and ghostly sight.

At the eastern angle of the enemy's camp burned a fire larger and brighter than the rest, and as he gazed, its blaze was suddenly obscured—then left clear again—then obscured once more ; and thus it kept vanishing and reappearing by turns for several minutes together, as if a long train of shadows were passing between it and himself.

At that unearthly hour, and in that superstitious age, such an apparition would have unnerved the boldest man ; but even this was not all. Though these ghostly riders were numerous enough to have made their hoof-tramp on this rough and rocky ground plainly heard, even at that distance, amid the tomb-like silence of night, not a sound reached the strained ear of the sentry, who crossed himself tremulously, convinced that what he saw was not of this world.

But the next moment brought him some encouragement; for, as the shadowy train drew nearer, an English sentinel's hoarse voice was heard challenging it, and another voice replying with the counter-sign.

This did not sound very ghostly, and the bold Breton, reflecting that a spirit would have no need of pass-words, was beginning to feel more composed, when a new and disturbing idea came to trouble him. As these strange riders were not ghosts, they must be English reinforcements coming up for the final assault; and this would make the case of the defenders more hopeless than ever.

Hardly had the thought struck him, when it was put to flight, and his superstitious terrors revived in full force, by a new and startling turn of this strange adventure.

The shadowy horsemen, dimly seen by the faint light of the dying fires, had all this while been gliding nearer and nearer to the town, noiselessly as ever. The sentry, watching them keenly, was just beginning to wonder if there could be a traitor within the fortress, and if these night-prowlers were advancing on it in the hope of having its gate opened to them, when, all at once, the foremost rider sank into the earth before the very eyes of the astounded watcher; and all the rest vanished in the same way, man by man, till not one was left—and all this without the slightest sound.

The sturdy Breton trembled like a leaf; but the man who just then came up to take his place hardly noticed how silently he slunk away, supposing him merely tired and sleepy, as was quite natural.

The new-comer, however, was fated to be as much startled in his turn.

Hardly had he begun to pace up and down, when a shadowy rider seemed to issue from the ground, silently as a dream, a little to his left; and then, one by one, the ghostly horsemen rose through the earth again as noiselessly as they had vanished into it!

For a moment, the new sentry was as much scared as his comrade; but he was a more experienced soldier, and the true explanation of this prodigy soon suggested itself to him. He called to mind that this part of the English camp was traversed by a deep and narrow ravine, through which the seeming phantoms must have made their way; and as for their silent movements, the veteran knew that horse-hoofs may sometimes be muffled!

Then came a cheering thought. Had these men belonged to the besieging host, they would have had no need for such caution; they must be friends, trying to reach the town without being detected!

Filled with joy at such unhoped-for help in their sorest need, he lost no time in announcing his discovery; and several officers hastened to the spot, just as a single form detached itself from the shadowy train, and rode close up to the gate.

"Open, I pray," he whispered; "we bring you aid and food."

"And perchance death too," said a veteran officer, warily. "How know we that ye are not betraying us? The English knaves have disguised them thus ere now. Till we know more of you, ye enter not here."

"Dally not, in Heaven's name! life and death are on every moment!" said the other vehemently, though still in a subdued tone. "I speak truth, I vow it by St. Anne of Auray! Call quickly your commandant, Sir Godefroi de Kerimel, if ye will not believe me."

But there was no need, for the commandant was already on the spot.

"Who art thou who wouldst speak with me?" he cried, looking keenly over the ramparts at the dim form below.

"Yvon de Laconnet," said the stranger; "thou hast heard of me, belike. Our captain bade me tell thee, as a token that we be true men, that we have with us 'Ar fol goët.'"

Most men would have seen no meaning in these Breton words, which imply merely "The fool of the forest;" but to De Kerimel and his men the strange phrase was like an electric shock.

"Open the gate!" he cried, "and praised be God, who hath sent such aid in our need!"

The gate was opened, and in filed a hundred and fifty stout men-at-arms, each with a bag of

meal at his saddle-bow, a welcome sight to the famished garrison.

De Laconnet told in few words how he and his men, on their way to the town, had met an English raiding party a hundred strong, and, falling on them by surprise, had cut them off to a man. Assuming as a disguise the red crosses of their slain foes, and getting the pass-word from one of their number, who had stolen in among the English after dark to learn it, they had come safe through the besieging army with their precious burden.

"But where is *he*, then?" asked Sir Godefroi, keenly scanning the long file of riders as they passed.

De Laconnet replied in a whisper so low as to be barely audible; but it seemed to startle the other like a thunder-clap.

"Now, may God guard him!" cried De Kerimel, crossing himself, "for never was such peril dared by mortal man!"

In truth, great as were the dangers that this chosen band had braved, they were nothing to the terrific peril which their leader was then facing. For that leader was one who thought nothing done while anything remained to do; and, where others would have been content to bring food and help to the hard-pressed fortress, he aimed at nothing less than the destruction of the formidable engine before which it was about to fall.

Tall, gaunt, black, loomed against the star-lit

sky (the golden spangles of which were just paling at the approach of dawn), the huge movable tower, so much dreaded by the defenders. At each corner of the platform on which it stood, the wary English leader had planted a sentinel; for he knew to his cost the daring of the besieged, and fully expected a desperate sally that night to attack the fatal engine.

But no sally came; and the four guards, drowsy with cold and watching, were yawning and rubbing their numbed hands, and doing their best to keep awake, when a hoof-tramp was heard, and up rode a single horseman, wearing the red cross of England.

"Hold, and give the word!" cried the foremost sentry, on the alert in a moment, while his comrade drew up to him, all ready for action.

"St. George for Guienne!" replied the newcomer at once. "Ye keep good watch, lads; but methinks there is little need of it now."

"Why so?" asked both at once, while the other two guards came round from the farther side of the tower to listen.

"Marry, the only foe within reach is already overthrown. Ye know we went forth on a foray yester-morn; and our hap was to light on a whole troop of these dainty Frenchmen, riding in hot haste toward the town, and every man with a bag of meal slung to his saddle, thinking belike to catch us napping, and get through to the hungry town with their baker's ware!"

The listening Englishmen gave an angry growl.

"But they reckoned without their host, for we fell upon them in right English fashion, and when we got among these meal-carriers, St. George! but we baked them a cake that they little relished! None escaped save the few we spared for ransom; and I have here two good war-steeds sent by our captain as a gift to stout Sir Nicholas, whom Heaven long preserve to command us!"

The narrator spoke loudly and rapidly, almost as if trying to drown some tell-tale sound; and so he was, though it would have needed a very quick ear to catch, amid the timbers that supported the formidable tower, a faint scraping, like the working of a well-oiled saw!

But even had they heard it, the English would hardly have heeded it, so taken up were they with the news of the supposed victory, and the noble horses that were its trophies, around which they pressed with a true English interest in a horse.

"They be goodly beasts, in truth," said one; "but I trow we have many a better nag in merry Yorkshire."

"Nay, there thou speak'st without warrant, Hal," cried a second. "See this black, what bone and sinew he hath! and what breadth too! Marry, he might bear Guy of Warwick, or Bevis of Hampton, armed at all points!"

Just then a faint clink, as of metal, was heard from the engine; and the strange horseman started

slightly, and shot a nervous glance at it, unseen by the rest.

"Hark! what sound was that?" cried an archer.

"A screw started in the framework, belike," said another. "It will make more noise ere long, when set against yon walls."

All laughed hoarsely at the grim jest; but the laughers little dreamed what was going on within a few feet of where they stood!

CHAPTER XVI

The Boldest Deed of All

But even had they seen what was passing so near them, the stout Englishmen would hardly have believed their own eyes.

While the pretended soldier was drawing off the attention of those who guarded the tower, two men, fully armed, had crept, one behind the other, along a deep trench that ran close to it, and worming their way beneath the huge fabric, had begun to saw in two the props that supported it!

If they were detected by the English (as was likely enough) it was, as both well knew, certain death; but this was the least of their perils, for should the tower give way one second sooner than they had calculated, they would be crushed to atoms by its fall. Bolder deed was never done by man, and small blame to the brave English yeomen if they had no suspicion of an attempt which, even in that age of rash and reckless valour, might well have seemed too daring to be possible.

Slowly and surely the perilous task was done, and the two heroes crawled back through the

sheltering trench. But just as they issued from it, they came face to face with an English archer!

"Ha! what means this?" cried the man, starting back. "Who are ye, fellows? Speak or die!"

The sole reply was a blow from the foremost stranger that laid him dead. The other despatched a second man, and a third fell by the pretended man-at-arms with whom he had just been talking.

"Treason!" shouted the fourth. "Up with ye, lads! bows and bills!"

These were the poor fellow's last words, for the next moment saw him laid beside his slain comrades, while the heroes of this daring venture leaped upon the horses which their confederate held in readiness, and dashed off at full gallop toward the town. But the alarm had been given, and the whole camp swarmed out like a hive of enraged bees.

"Foes! treason!" roared a hundred voices. "Down with 'em, comrades! no mercy to spies!"

But this was easier said than done. Well mounted, and fully armed, the three broke through their disordered assailants like a spider's web, and more than one stout fellow who thrust himself in their way paid dearly for his rashness.

"Well done, Roland! for a Breton jester, thou hast played right deftly the part of an English man-at-arms!" said the shorter of the two knights—a square, thick-set, powerful man in black armour, with a hoarse laugh. "Lucky for us, in sooth,

B 763

"THE BLACK KNIGHT TURNED LIKE A HUNTED LION"

thou hast learned their tongue so well, when captive among the dogs in Picardy. Well, Huon, lad, our work is done, and we must ride for it, if we would see another sun rise!"

"I care not, since we have saved the town," said his comrade—no other than Huon de St. Yvon, the youngest of Du Guesclin's turbulent cousins, now a wiser and better man than when his fierce brothers fell by his side on Calais causeway, five years before. "Yon accursed tower will never harm any one more, save the English rogues who handle it."

At that moment, as if to make good his words, came a deafening crash behind them, and a fearful cry. At the first push that urged the undermined tower toward the walls, it had come thundering down, dashing itself to pieces, and crushing more than a score of the English soldiers.

Taking advantage of the confusion caused by this unlooked-for disaster, the three bold men broke through or rode down all who barred their way, and were already near the gate, when down went Huon in a cloud of dust, horse and man. One of the countless arrows that whizzed around them had mortally wounded his gallant steed, which fell with its rider, bruising him sorely in the fall.

Quick as thought, the black knight sprang from his horse, dragged his fainting comrade up into the saddle, and bidding Roland ride by the hurt man and support him till he reached the town, turned

like a hunted lion on the pursuing English, whirling his mighty axe over his head with both hands.

Thrice it flashed and fell, and each time fell a man, and the boldest of the English hung back for a moment from the terror of an arm that seemed to carry certain death. Thick and fast rattled the arrows on his armour, but it was the work of a cunning armourer of Milan, and even the cloth-yard shafts of Old England smote it in vain.

All at once a commanding voice was heard above the din of the fray—

"Leave him to me, lads; he is a good knight, and I would fain try his mettle myself, body to body."

A tall, fine-looking man of middle age pressed his horse through the throng of English, who made way for him respectfully, for he was no other than the commander of the besieging army.

"Sir Knight," said he to the black warrior, "it were shame to let so good a champion be overborne by odds. I will meet thee with equal arms, man to man, and if I overcome thee, thou shalt yield to my mercy, but if thou hast the better, thou shalt pass free, under the knightly pledge of Sir Nicholas Dagworth. Art thou agreed?"

In our day it would greatly amaze every one to see two generals fight a duel on their own account in the midst of a battle, while their men looked on; but in that age such a thing was an everyday matter.

"Most willingly do I agree, good Sir Nicholas," said the unknown, courteously; "and if it be my hap to be overthrown, I grudge thee not what small fame may be won by vanquishing Bertrand du Guesclin."

"Du Guesclin!" echoed Dagworth, as a murmur of mingled wonder and admiration buzzed along the English ranks. "Then am I more highly favoured than I weened. I pray you of your courtesy, fair sir, to let me touch that victorious hand in friendship ere we fall to."

And the two men joined hands in a warm, brotherly clasp, as a fitting preface to doing their best to cut each other's throats!

Just then the city gate (through which Huon and the warlike jester had just passed) poured forth a gallant band of horsemen, led by De Kerimel himself. But when the rescuers saw what was going on, they drew rein at once, and looked on in silence, for one of the strictest rules of that age was never to interfere with a fair fight.

"I presume not to ask thee to fight on foot, noble sir," said Du Guesclin, hesitatingly, "but thou seest I have no horse, and——"

"Nay, if that be all, it is soon mended," cried Sir Nicholas. "Ho there! bring hither quickly my brown destrier" (war-horse).

The steed was brought, Bertrand mounted, and the knights hurtled together like contending whirlwinds.

Both spears flew crashing in a thousand splinters, and both steeds were thrown back on their haunches; but the riders kept saddle and stirrup, though it seemed to the lookers-on as if Dagworth, good knight as he was, had been rudely shaken.

Sir Nicholas took a new lance from his esquire, and Du Guesclin cried to the nearest English man-at-arms—

"Lend me thy lance, good fellow. I promise thee I will not shame it."

"Take it and welcome, good sir," said the stout spearman, heartily; "and wert thou fighting any but an Englishman, I would wish thee good speed!"

Bertrand laughed good-humouredly, and, wheeling his horse, dashed at his foe once more.

This time the result was not in doubt for a moment. Du Guesclin reeled in his saddle, and his horse all but fell; but as the dust of the shock subsided, Sir Nicholas was seen lying motionless on the earth.

Down leaped Du Guesclin, and, taking the fallen man by the hand, said earnestly—

"How is it with you, noble sir? Woe worth the day, if my ill hap hath made me harm the best knight I ever faced!"

"Grieve not, fair sir," said the brave Englishman, faintly. "I trow I shall live to fight another day, though I be sore shaken; but the victory is thine."

"I pray you, then," cried Bertrand, eagerly, as he raised him from the ground and signed to the

nearest men to support him, "let me buy of you this good horse that I have ridden to-day, for better could no man wish at need."

"Take him from me as a free gift, good Sir Bertrand," said his gallant foe, "and may he ever bear thee as bravely as he hath done this day!"

An hour later Bertrand, having seen the English host sullenly preparing to break up the now hopeless siege, sat in a chamber of the gate-tower beside his cousin Huon, who was by this time recovering from his fall.

"Bertrand," said the prostrate man, looking up at him, "thou hast not spared to risk thy life for mine; and yet, for I must needs tell it, I have envied thy renown, and would fain have done a deed this day that should match even thine!"

"Vex thyself about it no more, lad," said the great soldier, with a blunt kindliness that became him well. "So mean a thing as envy hath no abiding place, I wot, in the heart of a good knight like thee; and so long as a good and knightly deed is done, what matter if it be done by thee or me, or some better man than either? Trust me, cousin, the true hero is not he whose name is most vaunted by men, but he who hath striven most to do his duty before God."

"And such a hero art thou, Bertrand," said the other, brokenly: "and God be my witness that I repent me, from my very heart, that I ever envied thee or bare thee ill-will!"

CHAPTER XVII

The Haunted Circle

THE July sun of 1354 was shining warm and bright on the broad stream of the Loire, and lighting up the hard, wooden, sun-browned faces of a group of peasants who sat talking on a bench at the door of a tiny wayside inn, on the high-road leading inland from Nantes along the river.

"Ill times, brothers," said one older than the rest. "These 'Free Companies,' as men call them, are the bane of France. Luckily they have not come thus far yet; but who knows when they may? And if they do we are lost, one and all. Robbers in bands of twenty and thirty be ill enough, I trow; but when there come robbers enow for a whole army, with horse and foot, generals and captains, who take castles and put towns to ransom, what then?"

"Thou'rt right, Jacques. Wherever they have passed, 'tis as a flight of yon locusts whereof pilgrims tell. The whole face of the land is blasted!"

"Marry, thou say'st it, Paul; rich man's hall or

poor man's hut, 'tis all one to them. Hath a peasant but one liard (halfpenny) sewn up in the lining of his hose, they will find and seize it!"

"There be worse things in the land than they, howbeit," said another man.

"What, what?" cried several voices at once. "What worse can there be, lad?"

"Demons," said Pierre, in a hoarse whisper, "such as he of the Haunted Circle."

"Is the Phantom Knight abroad again, then?" asked Jacques, in an awe-stricken tone, while a visible shudder ran through the whole group.

"Ay, that is he. But three nights agone, Jean Roquard came home pale and fainting, having met the Phantom Knight in the moonlight; nor hath he been his own man since."

"What is this tale, then, of the Haunted Circle and the Phantom Knight?" asked a stout, ruddy man—shown by the pack beside him to be a travelling pedlar—whose air of good-humoured impudence might have served Shakespeare as a model for his Autolycus.

"Thou must needs be a stranger here, not to know it!" cried Paul. "But if thou wouldst hear the tale, here is one can tell it thee. Sing us the lay, Gilles. I fear it not by day, though I would not care to hear it at night."

The young fellow addressed—whose tawdry finery, and the light rebeck (lute) at his back, showed him to be one of the strolling minstrels

who then swarmed in every part of Europe—sang as follows—

"The vesper-bell was sounding sweet,
'Twas nigh the close of day,
When the Baron hied him forth alone,
But he hied him not to pray.

"He had thought upon an evil deed,
He had vowed an evil vow;
And he hied him to the darksome wood,
That had ne'er seemed dark as now.

"Amid that wood an altar stood,
With moss and weeds o'ergrown;
But they strove in vain to hide the stain
Of slaughter on the stone.

"For there of old had Pagan rites
Profaned the guiltless sod,
And blood had flowed in sacrifice
To many a heathen god.

"And legends told that he who durst
At nightfall stand alone,
And strike three blows with naked sword
Upon that gory stone,

"Should see the Prince of Evil Powers
Before his eyes displayed,
And claim, whate'er his purpose were,
The Demon's ready aid.

"The first stroke rang upon the stone—
A moaning wind swept by,
And a raven from a sapless oak
Sent forth its boding cry.

"At the second stroke, a sigh there broke
More deep than tongue can tell;
Therein his guardian angel breathed
A sad and last farewell.

"The sweat stood cold on the Baron's brow,
His heart it trembled sore;
But he clenched his teeth with a muttered curse,
And he reared his blade once more.

"The third stroke fell—o'er the haunted dell
There sank a chillness dread;
And a creeping horror o'er him stole,
And his heart grew dull as lead.

"And deeper blackness gathered round,
And tree and rock did hide;
But 'mid the gloom a shadowy form
Loomed dimly at his side.

"A shadowy form with wings of storm
And eyes of lurid blaze,
Like baleful stars that gleam to mock
The drowning seaman's gaze.

"'What seek'st thou here?' the Demon said
In voice of hollow tone,
As sounds among the leafless trees
The rising tempest's moan.

"Quoth the Baron, 'I seek revenge on one
Who long hath mocked my hate;
But vengeance is a dainty draught
That never comes too late.'

"The phantom laughed a fiendish laugh
That chilled the listening ear:
'Of all the gifts I can bestow,
Revenge is still most dear.

"'Tis a dainty draught when first 'tis quaffed,
And they who love it well,
What care they if, when the cup be drained,
It burn like the fire of hell?

"'Hear then my words : this night thy foe
Hath ta'en a pious thought,
And whines repentance for the deeds
Of ill that he hath wrought ;

"'And he is gone to kneel in prayer
Within yon chapel grey
That from its frowning crag looks o'er
The torrent's restless spray.

"'But lonely, lonely is the way,
And thou may'st meet him there ;
And if he fall unshrived and foul,
In vain were tear and prayer.

"'Speed then thy task, my trusty slave,
For though fiends around us lurk,
The soul that turns from good to ill
Doth best the Devil's work.'

"As downward sinks the creeping mist,
The phantom form was gone ;
As onward moves the gloom of night,
The Baron grim moved on.

"The golden sun was sinking slow,
And ruddy glowed the sky,
And birds were warbling in the trees,
And brooklets prattled by.

"But he but saw a baleful fire
That scorched the evening air,
And bird and brooklet wailed to him
In accents of despair.

"The soothing breeze, that thro' the trees
Whispered like angel's call,
Fell vainly now on his burning brow
As dews on deserts fall.

"And one sweet child its tiny hand
Reached forth his hand to clasp,
But he shrank away from the innocent touch
As from a deadly asp.

"And now he reached the lonely spot
Where he his foe must bide,
And crouched behind a blasted oak
All rent and gaping wide.

"With bended head and flagging tread
The death-doomed foe comes on;
His brow hath lost its haughty frown,
His eye's fierce fire is gone.

"With bended head and flagging tread
Comes on the death-doomed foe;
His hands are folded on his breast,
And thus he murmurs low:

"'Though late my penitence, O Lord,
Thy mercies still are sure;
And whether life or death be mine,
My trust shalt rest secure.'

"One rush—one blow—one stifled groan,
And nought but dust is there;
The soul that ever lived in sin
Hath fled at length in prayer.

"The slayer o'er the slaughtered stood,
And wiped his reeking blade,
And on his shoulders painfully
The bleeding corpse he laid.

"And onward to the roaring stream
That load of guilt he bore,
That, plunged beneath its wave, the dead
Might blast his sight no more.

"By this, the sun was sunk in night,
The sky grew black amain,
And cheerless gloom and horror drear
Crept o'er the darkening plain.

"And the clouds did fly o'er the stormy sky,
Driven by the tempest's power,
Like shadows cast by an evil Past
O'er a sinner's dying hour.

"And the wild wind's moan was like the groan
Of a soul at strife within;
And anon it roared like the yell outpoured
By fiends o'er a deed of sin.

"He stood upon the craggy height
That frowned above the wave,
And heard the torrent far below
In unseen fury rave.

"When lo! the fingers of the dead,
That erst hung limp and cold,
Entwined their grasp around his neck
With firm and deadly hold.

"And, fraught with death, the icy breath
Foul on his brow did reek,
And to his shudd'ring cheek was pressed
The corpse's clammy cheek.

"The thunder roared, but louder still
Was heard the crash below,
As, rent in twain, the mighty rock
Reeled trembling to and fro.

"Then thund'ring downward from its place
The riven fragment sped,
And with it fell, in grim embrace,
The Living and the Dead!

"Be warned, all ye who hear my lay,
And pray to God for grace
To keep your souls from the foul fiend's snare,
And your feet from his chosen place!"

His hearers tremblingly crossed themselves, and for some moments no one spoke. At last the pedlar said—

"The spot is haunted, then, by the ghost of yon felon knight?"

"Even so; and he is ever seen when evil is in store for France. Just ere Crecy Field was fought, men saw him flitting to and fro in the Haunted Circle, uttering cries that made all hearts fail; and now that he hath shown himself again, no doubt some fresh trouble is at hand. God help us!"

"Of what form is he?" asked the pedlar, his ruddy face paling visibly.

"Like a knight fully armed, but with armour of ancient fashion, and all stained and rusty with lying long in the damp grave. He is ever seen on foot, with visor closed and sword in hand; and, be the moon ever so bright, he hath no shadow!"

Another general shiver attested the force of this realistic touch.

"But two short leagues hence lieth his haunt," went on Jacques, "and ill it is for us, for none can pass that way by night without meeting him, and if they do——"

A gloomy shake of his head completed the sentence.

"Nay, if it be so," said the pedlar, with a tremor that he made no attempt to disguise, "though I had thought to sup at St. Barnabé to-night, I will e'en bide here till morn."

"Right, lad," cried Pierre. "He who would sup with the Evil One must have a long spoon, and mad indeed must he be who would brave the phantom on his own ground after dark! May God send us speedy deliverance from him, for in man is no help. What man will dare face what is not mortal?"

A deep voice behind the startled group answered, "*I* will!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A Phantom Warrior

All turned round with a start, and saw the helmeted head of a knight in full armour leaning out of the window just above them.

This knight had been, ever since he entered the little inn an hour before, an object of much curiosity and some fear to its whole household. He was sheathed in black armour from head to foot; he kept his visor closed, and through its bars the few words that he spoke sounded strangely hollow and grim; and there was about the whole man something so weird and gloomy and overawing that the host was moved to remark to his equally impressed wife that, had not the stranger crossed himself and murmured a prayer as he entered, and paid his reckoning in advance, he would certainly have taken him for the dreaded "Phantom Knight" himself!

Ere any of the astounded peasants could reply, the stranger went on—

"Hark ye, good fellows; which of ye will guide me to yon haunted spot? Rich shall be his reward."

The stupefied silence that followed was at last broken by old Pierre, who spoke the unanimous verdict of the whole party.

"Fair sir, all the gold in the king's treasury could not bribe any man of these parts to venture yonder after nightfall; and if your worship will heed a plain man's counsel, you will not venture it either. Think! what avails the bravest man on earth against a demon?"

"Were he the worst demon ever seen on earth," said the knight, undauntedly, "he can do nought beyond what God permits him to do; and one man who puts his trust in God is a match for all the spirits of evil. It is not meet that the Wicked One should play his pranks in this Christian land, and hinder honest folk from their lawful goings; and if none else can be found to drive him hence, I, with the aid of Heaven, will do it myself!"

So nobly confident, yet so devoutly humble, were the speaker's tone and bearing that a murmur of applause broke from his hearers, and even crabbed old Pierre eyed him admiringly, though still muttering—

"Would to Heaven it might be so! But bethink you, noble sir, a demon's arm is mighty to smite."

"So, perchance, is mine," said the unknown, quietly; and, snatching up a battle-axe so heavy that few men could have even lifted it, he hewed, at one blow, from a tree by the window a huge limb as easily as if he were slicing a peach.

A cry of amazement broke from the lookers-on, and Paul said eagerly—

"But one man in this realm could deal such a blow! Is your worship, then, our Bertrand du Guesclin?"

"I am," said the hero, to whose large human heart this tribute of simple affection from the down-trodden peasantry whom he had always pitied and defended was dearer than all the triumphs of his glorious life.

Instantly all were pressing around him, kissing his gauntleted hands, or begging to be allowed only to touch the famous weapon that had fought so well for the oppressed. Some would even have knelt at his feet; but the brave man drew back, and said simply—

"Kneel to God, friends, not to a poor sinner like me, and pray to Him to be with me this night when I go forth to fight with the powers of evil. And now," added he, in a lighter tone, "tell me my road, that I may go quickly to this haunted spot, and see if I can meet there anything uglier than myself; for I trow this demon (if he be one) hath as good cause to be scared at my face as I at his."

The peasants laughed at the great captain's rough jest on his own ugliness; and he, stamping on his memory the directions given him by old Pierre, rode off toward the dreaded spot, watched by the group as if he were entering a lion's den.

On fair ground, six miles would have been a

trifle to such a horse and rider; but the high-roads of that age were on a par with the dirtiest country lane of our time, and the byways far worse, and Bertrand knew better than to tire his steed on the eve of such a combat by putting it to speed over bad ground. So perplexing, too, were the paths he followed, that, in spite of the directions given him, he was forced to halt and look about at every turn, so that, though the sun was still high when he started, it was growing dark when he at last neared the Haunted Circle.

Whether from the deepening gloom or the ghastly associations of this evil spot, or both combined, it seemed to the bold intruder that he had never seen so ghostly a place. The broken path, barely wide enough for one man, wound steeply up through a tangled mass of black, shadowy thickets, the over-arching boughs of which took weird and spectral forms in the dim twilight. Here a monstrous snake reared up to enfold him; there a demon's clawed hand clutched at him as he passed; and, farther on, the gaping jaws of a wolf menaced him, or the thick, clumsy head of a huge black bear. The night wind moaned drearily through the dark tree-tops above, the hoarse rush of the unseen river came sullenly through the tomb-like silence from below, and the boding shriek of a raven from the deeper shadows seemed to claim as its prey the rash mortal who had dared to brave a power that was not of earth.

On went the bold Breton, fearless as ever, through the deepening blackness and the threatening phantoms, till all at once the matted boughs around him seemed to melt away, and he stood on the edge of a bare, open space—the famous Haunted Circle itself.

There it was at last, that spot of fearful memories, revealed in all its terrors by the bursting of the full moon through the gloom that had veiled it till then.

The minstrel's grim legend had described it truly enough. It was a circular clearing rather more than a hundred yards across, shut in on all sides by tall, dark trees, and in the centre stood a low mound of crumbling stones, overgrown with weeds and long grass—the pagan altar, no doubt, of the ballad.

Bold as he was, Bertrand felt his heart beat quicker as he set foot on the haunted ground; but he rallied his courage, and, stepping into the circle, was about to smite the ruined altar with his axe, according to the form prescribed for summoning the haunting spirit, when a fearful cry, half shriek and half roar, broke from the gloomy thickets, and into the ring came leaping, with frantic bounds, and gestures more frantic still, a figure that made even Du Guesclin's brave blood run cold.

It was a tall form in full armour, with closed visor and drawn sword, just as the peasants had described it; but the armour was stained with

mould, and red with rust from helm to heel, giving to the spectre, in the fitful moonlight, an aspect horribly suggestive of being steeped in blood. In place of plumes there clung to the helmet a bunch of weeds clotted with earth, as if he had torn them up by the roots in bursting from his grave; and the glistening scales of a dead snake twined about his neck made around it a foul and corpse-like rainbow.

"Who and what art thou?" cried Du Guesclin, crossing himself with a hand that trembled in spite of all his courage.

"A demon," replied a hollow voice from the barred helmet, in a tone of unutterable horror.

Bertrand fully believed the ghastly assertion, but it could not make him waver for a moment.

"If thou art indeed a demon," said he, firmly, "I, as a Christian man, bid thee defiance; but if thou art spellbound by enchantment, my good steel may break the spell and set thee free. Tarry till I alight, for thou art on foot, and it shall never be said that I fought Satan himself unfairly."

He leaped from his horse, and in a moment his axe and the stranger's sword were clashing fiercely together and sending showers of sparks into the encircling gloom.

At the first crash and shock of blows the Breton hero was his own daring self once more. Demon or no demon, this strange foe could smite and be smitten; and at the familiar feeling of hand-to-hand

combat all the ghostly terrors that had haunted him vanished like morning mist.

But, strong and brave as he was, he had for once met his match. The storm of strokes showered on him were dealt with the savage force of one who cared not for his own life could he but strike down his foe. Again and again did the great warrior reel back from such a blow as he had never felt before, and he might be pardoned if the conviction rose anew in his mind that he had to do with no mortal enemy.

How this strange combat might have ended it would be hard to say; but all at once, as the Phantom Knight dealt a tremendous blow right at his opponent's head, his rusted sword snapped off at the hilt with a sharp crash, leaving him defenceless.

But this mishap, so far from daunting him, seemed to goad him to fury. With a cry of rage he hurled the broken weapon far away, and, springing like a tiger on Du Guesclin, seized him in a clutch that made every joint of his armour crackle.

But this mode of attack was not likely to take by surprise the best wrestler in Brittany. Quick as thought Bertrand dropped his axe, and, in turn, seized his foe in a hug worthy of a Polar bear, and the grapplers swayed to and fro, stamping, struggling, gasping, now one and now the other seeming to have the mastery.

But with this grapple body to body the last of

Bertrand's doubts vanished. This strange foe, whoever he might be, was plainly flesh and blood like himself, and he now began to suspect that he had to do with neither demon nor ghost, but simply with a madman.

Nerved by this thought, the hero put forth all his strength, and, bringing into play a dexterous trip that he had learned long ago, bore his formidable enemy clear off his feet, and hurled him to the earth with crushing force, falling right upon him.

As the unknown lay stunned and motionless, Du Guesclin, bending over him, unbarred his visor, eager to see what features it hid. But when the stranger's face lay bare before him, fully revealed in the glorious moonlight, the Breton started as if stung, and muttered tremulously—

"Heaven help us! Can this be indeed he?"

Late that night the host of the one small inn at St. Barnabé was startled by a succession of thundering strokes on his barred door, and an imperious summons, in a loud, harsh voice, to open at once. Nor was he much reassured, when he did at last open the door (which seemed likely to be beaten down about his ears if he did not), to see an armed man on foot leading a horse on which lay another man seemingly dead or sorely wounded.

But the name given by the new-comer was a passport to the heart of every Frenchman, and a handful of silver set at rest any lingering doubts of the worthy host, who declared himself ready to

"do aught that might pleasure the worshipful Messire Bertrand du Guesclin."

The senseless man was carefully undressed and laid in a small upper room, where Bertrand watched by his side all that night, still uncertain if the crazed, haggard, ghastly sufferer before him could really be the same man whom he had last seen in the pride of youth and vigour and beauty, with all the fairest gifts of life within his reach.

Toward morning the sick man began to mutter uneasily, and then poured forth a flood of wild and rambling talk, amid which came words that, broken and confused as they were, thrilled Bertrand's bold heart with horror.

But as he listened, stronger and stronger grew the conviction that his wild guess was right, and that this distracted sufferer was really the man he thought; and when at last the rising sun streamed into the sick-room, lighting up the helpless man's sunken face—that face, ravaged and ruined as it was, retained enough of its former self to change his suspicions into certainty.

"Alured de Claremont!" cried he. "Is it thus that we meet again?"

"Who speaks my name?" asked a hollow voice, as the sick man started half erect, with a visible gleam of reviving reason in his haggard eyes. "I was called thus while I lived; but now I am a dead man, and given over, body and soul, to the powers of evil."

The simple, downright intellects of the fourteenth century knew nothing of "immutable laws of being," "workings of nature," "fortuitous conjunction of atoms," and the other neat little phrases with which God's creatures are now doing their best to blot Him out of His own world. To them, God was God, and Satan Satan; and whatever befell them, good or ill, was directly traceable to one or the other.

Hence Bertrand never doubted for a moment that the wretched man's fearful words were literally true; nor would he have been surprised had the Evil One started up in bodily form to claim his prey. But this only made the devout warrior all the more determined to wrest from Satan a soul that belonged to God.

"Not so!" cried he, sturdily. "There can be no true compact with one that is a liar from the beginning, and Satan hath nought to do with a soul that our Lord hath redeemed. I tell thee, if the Wicked One were to rise before us this moment, and claim thee for his, he should not have thee! In a cause that is good and holy, I fear neither man nor foul fiend!"

"And who art thou who speak'st so boldly?" asked Alured, gazing admiringly at the glow of manly enthusiasm which, for the moment, fairly transfigured the other's harsh features.

"I am a poor knight of Brittany, named Bertrand du Guesclin."

"Du Guesclin?" echoed Alured, with the first sign of returning energy that he had yet shown. "Art thou indeed he?"

"I am; and thou and I are acquainted of old. Thou wert a guest long since in my father's castle of Motte-Brun, and I met thee afterwards at Rennes and Dinan. Tell me thy tale, I pray; and whatever aid I can give thee shall be given right gladly."

"No help can avail me now," replied the other, relapsing into his former gloom. "Hast thou the courage to hear what I have done?"

"I have," said the hero, simply. "When a man hath done amiss, what better can he do than confess and repent? And Heaven forbid that I, a sinful man, should be harsh to thee when God hath been merciful to us all. Tell thy tale, and when it is told we will take counsel what to do."

Not till two hours later did Du Guesclin at last come down from the sick-room, and, then putting several gold pieces into the hand of the bowing host, he bade him go quickly and find a stout horse for the hurt knight.

Spurred alike by the hope of pleasing "Messire Bertrand," and the inspiring prospect of making at least twenty-five per cent. profit on the job, the worthy host was so active that ere Alured—who now looked and spoke quite like a rational man—was fully equipped for the journey, his horse stood ready at the inn door.

"I owe thee more than I can ever repay, noble

Sir Bertrand," said he; "and I vow to God, Our Lady, and Monseigneur St. George of England, that never will I cleanse this armour from rust, till I have done some deed by which I may know that I can hope to be forgiven."

CHAPTER XIX

In a Robber Camp

On a low ridge overlooking the town of Carcassonne—girt then, as now, by the huge, dark-grey walls, against which, a century and a half before, Simon de Montfort's destroying hosts had beaten in vain—was pitched the camp of one of those terrible "Free Companies" which, as the old peasant of the Loire had truly said, were the bane of France.

At every period of the Dark Ages, Europe swarmed with robber bands; but the fourteenth century alone could have exhibited such a phenomenon as robber bands six, eight, and ten thousand strong, with tents, banners, waggon-trains, generals, officers, and even clergymen of their own. For so strange a thing is human nature, that each of these brigand-armies had its own chaplain (usually as ruffianly as his bandit flock), and these double-dyed villains, who set at nought all the laws of God and man, would have shuddered at the thought of going forth to rob and murder till this model Churchman had solemnly blessed the enterprise, and prayed Heaven to aid them to steal and slay.

The strong walls of Carcassonne itself had defied these plunderers; but all around it they had been terribly busy—seizing castles, burning villages, sacking towns, wasting what miserable remnants of cultivation the ceaseless wars had left, inflicting tortures too hideous to name on all whom they suspected of having any money, and, in a word, draining the very life-blood of the ill-fated land on which all calamities known to men seemed outpoured at once.

Apart from the brutal faces of the men themselves, unmistakable proofs of what they were lay all around. Splendid armour, flecked with ominous drops of red, rich gold and silver plate, gay clothing and costly jewels, lay scattered in the dirt like things of no value, and, farther on, appeared a bound and helpless mass of men, women, and children, some dissolved in tears, others plunged in silent despair, who had been prosperous burghers, thriving farmers, or well-to-do craftsmen, till the clutch of the Free Company changed them in a moment to beggared and broken-hearted captives.

On one side, two old comrades were fighting hand to hand, and mangling each other with ghastly wounds over a sudden and senseless quarrel about the division of their plunder. On the other, a ruffian who had been losing heavily at dice, had just ended the game by the simple method of stabbing the winner to the heart, and was rummaging

from the dead man's pockets, with a wolfish grin, all the coin they held. From end to end of the camp brutal oaths, blasphemous songs, ribald tales, savage abuse in half a dozen languages, and jests too horribly foul to quote, made the air ring; and, in the midst of this hell on earth, a filthy and half-drunken cut-throat, supporting himself by the shoulder of an equally drunken comrade, was boisterously drinking the health of the Evil One, while his companion, holding a plundered church-chalice to his lips with a hand still wet from recent murder, hoarsely added, "May he send us a long and bloody war!"

A little apart sat the leader of that wolfish host —a leader fully worthy of them, who, so far as he differed from his fellow-brutes, differed for the worse.

He was a man of giant size, whose heavy, low-browed, bulldog face, seamed with scars and bloated with habitual excess, was half hidden by a shaggy beard and a mane of coarse black hair. By him lay his stained and battered armour, and his mighty limbs were thrown carelessly on a torn and muddied altar-cloth of embroidered velvet, as he drank his wine from a sacramental cup—proceedings watched with visible dismay by some of his followers, who, steeped as they were in the foulest crimes, could still tremble at the thought of sacrilege.

But whatever they might think, no one dared to

say a word; for Croquart (the Cruncher)—as this ruffian was named, from the ravages that had made him the terror of the whole country—was not a safe man to provoke at any time; and just then it was plain by the black frown which darkened his low brow, that he was, if possible, in a worse temper than usual.

In fact, the worthy cut-throat was finding out, to his great disgust, that even robbers cannot get a living where there is no one to rob; and such was now the case in his present field of operations.

As soon as it was known that the dreaded Croquart and his men were encamped by Carcassonne, all alike — travellers, traders, pilgrims, labourers, and even beggars—avoided the town as if the plague were in it, preferring to make a circuit of many miles rather than risk falling into the hands of a man whose pet sport was to burn people alive, or tie them to a tree to be shot full of arrows!

For three days the wide sweep of bare upland overlooked by the robber camp had lain voiceless and lifeless as a desert. No living thing was to be seen, and Croquart, not having robbed or murdered any one for three whole days, found time hang heavy on his unwashed hands.

"Where loiter these dog scouts of mine?" growled the ruffian, glaring round with his bloodshot eyes in quest of the two swift riders whom he had sent forth to watch for any sign of prey. "If

they bring not word of some game afoot, it shall go ill with them! Swords and halberds! a man may as well be a stone or a stock as sit here doing nought till his sinews wax rusty through idleness!"

Hardly had he spoken when two riders were seen approaching, but so slowly and unwillingly that it was plain they had no success to report. Keeping at a safe distance—for this savage, in his fits of drunken fury, cared as little for the lives of his own men as for those of his wretched captives—they shouted to him that they had scoured the whole district and found nothing.

Croquart growled a fearful curse, and gripped his sword-hilt as if about to kill them both. Then his mood suddenly changed, and he gave a hoarse laugh.

"Since my guests are so long in coming, it is meet they be well received when they do. May I never take plunder more if I bind not to a tree the first man who passes, and shoot as many arrows into him as there be quills on a hedge-hog!"

As the wretch uttered his cruel vow—which all who heard it knew he would keep—a single figure was seen advancing, in the dark robe of a monk. A nearer view showed the white hair and beard of an old man; and then the startled robbers recognized the pilgrim-monk, Brother Michael!

CHAPTER XX

Doomed

At sight of that well-known face a thrill of superstitious terror pulsed through the savage band, in all but the very worst of whom the feelings and beliefs of their childhood had not been wholly extinguished even by a life of rapine and crime. They still retained their instinctive awe of the Church and all belonging to it, and feared the grey frock far more than the coat of mail.

But their present panic had another and a deeper source. Now that these fierce and lawless robbers, who were wont to spread terror wherever they came, had at last met a man who was not afraid of them, they at once began to be afraid of him. One who could thus venture among them alone and unarmed must be strong in the possession of some supernatural power; and they shrank from this solitary and defenceless old man as if he had an armed host at his back.

Mingling with this terror came another of a different kind. Many of them had heard Croquart utter his cruel vow to torture to death the first

man who passed; and the first man was the "Pilgrim of God" himself! Would the savage dare to lay hand on him? and if he did, what then?

The ruffians began to whisper uneasily to each other, and to cast nervous glances at their ferocious chief, who had not yet caught sight of the newcomer.

But he for whom they feared seemed to have no fear for himself. Quietly and steadfastly he went forward through the terrible camp, right up to its grim leader, whom he singled out at once; and meeting without flinching the glare of mingled amazement and fury cast at him by the arch-murderer's fiery eyes, said, mildly but firmly—

"Peace be with thee, my son."

"That is as who should say 'Starvation be with thee!'" growled the ruffian. "What have we to do with peace?"

"What, indeed?" said the monk, in a tone so sad and solemn that even the soulless brute whom he addressed found no reply.

By this time all the bandits were flocking to the spot, and hundreds of silent and terrified spectators were gathered round the two men as they stood facing each other.

Then, amid that hush of awe-stricken expectation, Brother Michael spoke.

"Hear me, unhappy man, for thine own sake! Thou hast shed seas of innocent blood, and

blighted the homes and harvests of the poor, and robbed holy churches, and profaned the sacred vessels of the altar; and now am I sent by Heaven to warn thee to repent of thy misdeeds ere it be too late; for lo! even now is God's judgment hanging over thy head, ready to fall and crush thee!"

Croquart fairly gasped with amazement and rage. Never yet had the boldest and fiercest of the armed ruffians around dared even to contradict him; and here was a solitary man, aged, feeble, unarmed, bearding him in his own camp! What could this mean?

For one moment a thrill of vague terror shook the robber's iron heart; and then, as usual with such base and brutal natures, he hastened to right himself in his own eyes for what he deemed a weakness by a fresh burst of blustering fury.

"Prate not to me, shaveling, but bethink thee how thou wilt face the doom that hangs over thy head! Know'st thou I have vowed to set up as a target for our arrows the next man who passed, and thou art he? How lik'st thou that?"

"I cannot believe," said the old man, as calmly as ever, "that thou couldst do so base a deed as harm an aged man who stands unarmed before thee, and hath done thee no wrong. But if thou wilt do it, work thy will. I fear thee not. Thou canst but kill the body, and God will give me strength to die."

Croquart stamped till the earth flew up in showers from beneath his armed heel. Like other such monsters, he loved cruelty for its own sake, and enjoyed as a luxury the agony of his victims at the prospect of torture and death; but when, as now, he had to do with a man who had no fear of death, and seemed rather eager to be tortured than otherwise, the sport lost all its savour.

All at once a new thought struck him, and, turning hastily to the old monk, he said—

"From what place didst thou come hither to us?"

"From Carcassonne," said the monk. "I heard thou wert here, and came to visit thee."

The look of dismay deepened visibly on the faces of the listening robbers as they heard this aged and solitary man talk so calmly of "coming to visit" one whose very name was the terror of the whole district. Surely this marvellous stranger, whom nothing could daunt, must be a saint—perhaps the great St. Denis of France himself!

But the words that acted so powerfully on the rest passed almost unnoticed by Croquart, who heard only the one word "Carcassonne."

"Thou hast been in the town, then," he cried, "and hast seen the strength of the defences and of the garrison? Hark ye, old mole; on one condition I give thee thy life. Aid us to take the town, and, once we are in it, thou shalt go free. Refuse, and thou diest!"

"I refuse," said the old man, without a moment's hesitation.

A quick gasp of terrified amazement hissed through the tomb-like silence, while Croquart stood for an instant literally dumb with fury.

"Ho, fellows!" he roared at last, "bind him to the nearest tree, and choose out your sharpest arrows!"

But, for the first time, his savage followers, instead of obeying, hung back with an audible murmur, and one or two slunk away outright.

"Cowards!" yelled the furious bandit. "Do ye call yourselves men, and let the prate of an old dotard scare ye all? I will bind him, then, if none else dare; and Satan himself shall not deliver him out of my hands!"

"But God may," said the aged hero, simply.

"We shall see," retorted Croquart, with a ferocious laugh. "I will shoot the first arrow at thee, and let God save thee if He can!"

His arm was extended to clutch his unresisting prisoner, when a cry of wonder and alarm from those on the outskirts of the crowd, instantly echoed by the whole throng, made him turn just in time for a very startling sight.

On the crest of the ridge above, as if in direct answer to the blasphemous challenge, had just appeared a single rider in full armour, so suddenly, and with such an appearance of actually issuing from the sunset glory which played around him,

that he seemed to the startled robbers to be descending among them from the sky. His armour, from head to heel, was all one glow of deep, burning red, as if he were actually clothed with fire; and, in the light of the sinking sun, horse and rider seemed dilated to gigantic size, far beyond that of mortal beings.

This time the terror of the brigands was so marked and universal that it infected even their brutal leader, whose swarthy face paled to the very lips as he heard his men mutter tremulously—

"The archangel St. Michael, come down from heaven to avenge his namesake!"

Such was Croquart's own secret conviction; and this speedy and terrible answer to his impious defiance changed the ruffian's drunken fury to dismay.

In fact, the descent of a saint or angel in bodily form to champion right and redress wrong was, to all the witnesses of this strange scene, not merely possible, but just what was to be expected. The constant intervention of supernatural beings in natural affairs was as firm and universal a belief in that age as in the days of Homer; and the wild plunderers, terrified as they were by this celestial apparition, never thought of being surprised at it. Their chief had rashly challenged Heaven to snatch his prey from him, and Heaven had taken him at his word.

Mute and motionless, the armed hundreds stood

gazing as the fiery warrior moved slowly toward them with braced shield and levelled spear, seeming to grow larger every moment. On he came, uttering no war-cry, speaking no word, and adding by this ghostly silence a tenfold horror to his apparition.

But as he drew nearer his aspect began to lose something of its terrors. His stature dwindled to that of a common man, his giant steed now seemed no larger than an ordinary horse, and the red glow of his armour was seen to be due not to celestial fire, but to the play of the sunset on the rust that coated it.

But all this did nothing to allay the superstitious fears of the bandits. If Monseigneur St. Michael did not think it worth while to avenge this audacious defiance himself, might he not have sent to do it for him some good knight who had been long dead—say one of Charlemagne's Paladins? As the dreaded stranger approached, all fell back to right and left in silent awe, leaving Croquart and the captive monk standing alone amid the spell-bound circle.

Within a few paces of the robber-captain the unknown champion halted suddenly, and at last broke the dreadful silence.

"Who dares lay hand on God's servant?" cried he, in a deep, stern voice. "This holy man is no captive for such as you. I will lead him hence forthwith."

"There go two words to that bargain," retorted Croquart, who, having begun to realize that he had to do with a mortal being after all, was fast regaining his wonted swaggering insolence. "Who art thou, fellow, to dare to thrust thyself into my camp, and speak so boldly of setting free mine own captive? Here be cords enow to bind thee as well as him, and our shafts will find their way through thy coat-of-plate as easily as through his grey frock."

"Silence, dog!" thundered the unknown, who was no other than Sir Alured de Claremont, fulfilling his vow of expiation. "If thou art not a coward as well as a thief and a murderer, I defy thee, in this holy man's quarrel, to meet me with equal arms on this spot, man to man and lance to lance; and may God defend the right!"

Foaming with rage, the savage leader roared for his war-horse, and in a trice sat erect in his saddle with levelled lance, fiercely confronting his challenger.

The cowed robbers held their breath to watch the encounter, in terrified expectation of they knew not what. But how that encounter was to end neither they nor any man living could have foreseen.

Ere the signal for the charge could be given, Croquart's noble horse (which had borne him gallantly through countless frays) was all at once seen to give a violent start, and began to rear and plunge

as if maddened with sudden terror. Then, heedless of its rider's cruel spurs, and the grasp of his iron hand on its bridle, it gave one frantic bound, and tore away straight toward the spot where the curving ridge ended abruptly in a sheer precipice of more than a hundred feet.

The cry of horror from the lookers-on was barely heard when, with one headlong rush, horse and rider were seen to vanish over the brink of the abyss. There was a stifled cry, a dull crash, and man and beast lay together at the foot of the precipice, a crushed, shapeless, mangled mass.

"It is the hand of Heaven!" said Brother Michael, solemnly. "May God have mercy on his soul!"

But the pitying words were drowned in the clamorous cries with which the terrified robbers threw themselves at the feet of this fearful man, who they firmly believed had destroyed their leader by supernatural power, and was able to bring down at any moment the same swift and certain destruction on themselves.

"Have mercy and spare us, holy father, and we will do what penance thou wilt."

"Kneel not to me, your fellow-sinner, my children," said the old man, kindly. "Repent of your misdeeds, and I will tell ye how ye may prove your repentance sincere, and do good service to God and man. Beyond yon mountains" (and he pointed to the dim and far-off outline of the blue, shadowy

Pyrenees) "your Christian brethren of Spain are warring for the cause of God against the Moorish unbelievers, hard pressed and sore beset. Go ye thither to aid the warriors of the Cross; and he among you who seeks reward shall find rich spoil there, and he who hath higher thoughts shall win the favour of Heaven. Children, will ye go?"

The last words rang out like a trumpet-blast, and with one voice the fierce men answered—

"We will! we will!"

"Come thou with us, father, and be our captain!" shouted a black-bearded Gascon giant, in a voice like the bellow of a bull, "and if any man dare cross thee, I'll cut him to joints with my own hand!"

"I thank you right heartily for your goodwill to me, my sons," said the monk, as the faintest glimmer of a smile flitted over his thin, worn face; "but my weapons are not of this world, and he who shall lead ye must fight as well as pray. Heaven itself hath sent you a captain in your need, and here he stands."

And he pointed to Sir Alured, who, not yet recovered from his stupefaction at this sudden and fearful tragedy, sat motionless on his horse like an armed statue.

This unlooked-for election was received with clamorous applause.

"Well chosen, holy father!" cried the big Gascon. "In truth, he who could venture singly

into our camp to rescue thee, and face hundreds all alone, must be a captain worth following; and follow him we will, through fire and water. Long live our captain!"

"Long live our captain!" echoed hundreds of voices, with a mighty shout.

At that shout, Alured's haggard face lighted up for a moment with all the fire of former days; but it clouded again at once, and he replied sadly—

"Right glad should I be to lead ye in a good cause; but there lies heavy guilt on my soul, and till that guilt is confessed and absolved (if absolved it may be), I am not worthy to lead Christian men in the cause of God."

"It is well spoken, my son," said the monk; "and he that humbleth himself, as thou hast done, shall be exalted. Come hither with me apart, and tell thy tale freely."

Briefly and clearly, De Claremont told of the fatal combat on Calais sands, the fall of his brother Hugo by his hand, and his own headlong flight from the accursed spot. More he could not tell, for (perhaps in mercy) all that had followed was blotted out as if it had never been, and of what had befallen in the interval, up to his encounter with Du Guesclin, he had no recollection whatever.

The good old man heard the dismal tale with close attention, and, as it ended, laid his thin hand on the penitent's bowed head with the tenderness of a father.

"I say not that thou hast not sinned deeply, my son," said he, gently; "but, thank God, thou art free from the brand of Cain, for not in envious malice and of set purpose, like that wicked one, hast thou slain thy brother. It was a hasty quarrel, fought out with equal arms, and he might well have taken thy life instead. Sinner thou may'st be, but murderer art thou none. This day will I myself cleanse the rust from thine armour, in token that the Evil One hath no power over thee; for God sends not the bondmen of Satan to rescue the servants of Heaven, as thou hast done this day. Go forth, and lead these men southward with a good courage; for know that yonder in the south some great and unthought-of blessing awaits thee, though it hath not been given me to know what it shall be. Go, then, and God be with thee!"

CHAPTER XXI

The Black Wolf

On the same day on which Alured perilled his life to save the monk, a man was sitting alone, beside a dying fire, in the gloomy depths of the great forest which then covered a large part of that wild region south of the Loire, which was to be terribly famous, four centuries later, under the name of La Vendée.

This solitary forester was an apt figure for that background of gloomy trees and matted thickets. He was a man of high stature and powerful build, whose huge frame, though gaunt as a wolf, showed in every movement a tiger-like strength and elasticity with which few men could have coped. His ragged clothing, and rusty, dinted steel-cap, matched well with his grim, sullen, shaggy-bearded face, and the restless watchfulness of his keen black eyes, which had the half-cowed, half-ferocious look of a trapped beast of prey; and altogether, he was the last man that a timid wayfarer would have wished to meet in such a place.

All at once he raised his head with a quick,

sharp movement, as if he had just caught some distant sound, though the faint and far-off hoof-tramp would have escaped any ear less keen and practised. But that he heard it was plain from the cruel smile that lighted up his dark face as he muttered, after listening intently for a moment—

"He is alone—good luck!"

The business-like alacrity with which he caught up his heavy ghisarme (long-handled battle-axe), and stood facing the point where the coming rider would appear, gave an ominous meaning to his words.

Nearer and nearer came the measured tramp, and at last a single rider in full armour, with visor closed, issued from the wall of leaves right in front of the grim watcher.

"Stand!" shouted the latter, with a menacing flourish of his weapon.

But the new-comer, though his short figure looked quite dwarfish beside the giant forester, seemed not a whit dismayed at this rude greeting, or at the grim aspect of his challenger. There was even a tinge of scorn in his voice as he asked—

"Who art thou, to be so bold as bid me stand?"

"I am one," said the woodsman, with another flourish of his axe, and a growl like a wounded bear, "who will walk the good green wood as I will, and ask no leave of thee!"

"Thou art right, for these woods be none of mine," laughed the traveller; "but they are not

thine either, so I will forth on my way, and ask no leave of thee!"

"Wilt thou? Two words to that bargain," roared the giant, stung to fury by this quiet scorn. "If thou wilt pass hence, thou must pass over my body."

"Aha! thou would'st fight me man to man?" cried the stranger, as gleefully as a boy invited to join a cricket-match. "Art thou an outlaw of the wood?"

"I am, and I care not who knows it. I have vowed never to spare knight or noble, wherefore look well to thyself."

"And how know'st thou I am either?"

"Because thou fearest nothing," said the robber, simply.

"Well said!" cried the stranger, heartily. "Thou art a fellow worth fighting, and gladly will I have a bout with thee; but tarry till I alight, for 'twixt horseman and footman is no fair fight."

As he sprang from his horse, and tied him to a tree, the bandit eyed him in blank amazement, and said—

"Art thou indeed knight and noble?"

"Why ask?" cried the other, with a hearty, boyish laugh. "Fear'st thou I am of too low degree for the worshipful sword of a knightly outlaw?"

"Not so; but because thou art the first of them who ever showed knightly courtesy to such as I."

The knight winced as if the words stung him, and said gravely—

"A good knight is bound to show courtesy to every man for his own sake."

His tone and manner had a quiet dignity that abashed the savage in spite of himself; and the latter's keen eye had noted the ease with which this stranger moved in his heavy armour, his nimbleness in leaping from his horse, and the formidable weight of spear, shield, and battle-axe. He began to guess (though this only heightened his eagerness for the fray) that he had for once met his match.

But as he advanced with lifted axe, the knight stopped him once more.

"Aid me first, comrade, to doff this steel harness of mine, for thou hast no body-armour, and it behoves us to fight fairly. My helmet I must needs keep, for I have vowed that my face shall not be seen till I have achieved the quest on which I am bound; but it matters not, as thou hast a steel cap."

Again the bandit looked wonderingly at this man, who was conceding to him point after point of vantage, in a combat for life and death.

"Wilt thou then trust me so far?" said he, as he aided the knight to doff his heavy panoply. "Fear'st thou not that I may stab thee in the back unawares?"

"Not I," said the stranger, coolly; "I have

trusted thee, and thou wilt not betray my trust. In a brave man is no treachery."

For the first time, the savage's sullen face brightened, and assumed a higher and more human expression than it had yet worn.

"Thou art a true man, whoever thou be'st!" said he, in a tone of grim and half-unwilling admiration; "and thou hast spoken such words as no man ever spake to me yet. 'Tis pity of my vow to spare neither knight nor noble, else would I spare thee!"

"Not so!" cried the other, in just the same jovial tone in which he would have challenged a friend to a game of bowls. "Do thy best, and spare not; and even so will I."

And at it they went like giants.

Strong, active, used to hand-to-hand fights, the outlaw showered his blows like hail; but all in vain. Some of his strokes were avoided with a nimbleness quite amazing in a man of the stranger's thickset, clumsy build, and others were warded with a strength that made the assailant reflect with inward dismay how terrible in attack must be that surpassing force which, even in defence, made itself so formidably felt.

More clearly every moment did the outlaw realize that, with all his courage and strength, he was hopelessly overmatched; and the worst of it was that this mysterious foe, whose face he had never seen, made no attempt to strike in return,

and seemed to watch, with cold composure, the doomed man wasting his strength in vain efforts, as if meaning to wait till he was utterly spent, and then despatch him with a single blow.

What face was hidden by that barred helmet? A spectre? a demon? the ghost of one of his countless victims, risen from the grave for vengeance? the Evil One himself, come to snatch him away with all his sins on his head? Conscience made a coward of this man of a thousand crimes; and, bold as he was, he felt his heart sink as it had never sunk before.

Driven to desperation, he dealt a fearful blow at his foe's unarmed body. But the stroke was wasted on the empty air, and ere the outlaw could recover his guard, the knight sprang in and clutched his weapon with both hands, and, with one mighty wrench, snapped the strong shaft like a twig!

The disarmed bandit was at his foe's mercy; but in place of killing him at a blow, as he expected, the knight threw down his axe, saying—

"True battle calls for equal arms. As thou hast lost thy weapon, let us try it with our bare hands."

This time the outlaw's amazement was too great for words; and it was mechanically rather than from any reasoning impulse that he closed with his strange foe in a desperate grapple.

But he fared no better than before; for, once clutched in his opponent's terrible grasp, he had

no more chance than a deer in the coils of a boa. A frantic, useless struggle, which left him weaker and more breathless than ever—a dizzy whirl—a sudden shock—and he was lying flat on the earth, sick and giddy, and gasping for breath, with his foeman's knee on his chest.

"Slay me if thou wilt," panted he, with a defiant scowl; "I ask no mercy."

"Not I!" cried the victor, with a loud, jovial laugh. "Good men-at-arms like thee are too rare to be wasted. Hark ye, friend; I will make a bargain with thee. If thou be a rover of these woods, thou must know one called 'The Black Wolf of the Forest,' who hath haunted them this many a day, and done much ill to many. Him have I bound me to seek out, and if thou wilt guide me to his haunt, the moment he and I stand face to face, thou art free to go whither thou wilt."

"Dost thou jest?" said the staring robber. "Thou art the first who ever wished to meet him whom all men shun."

"I jest not with men's lives," said the knight, simply. "As I have said, so shall it be."

"As thou wilt," said the other, rising slowly from the ground. "Follow me."

Away they went through the black depths of the wood, the outlaw keeping beside his companion's horse with a long, swinging stride.

On their way, the knight, seeing that his guide looked hungry and worn, shared his own scanty

stock of food with him; and ere long (as often happened in that wild age with men who had just stood sword-point to sword-point) the two became quite confidential, and were soon talking as frankly as old friends.

At last the knight hinted to his new acquaintance that a stout fellow like himself might be better employed in defending his country against her foes, than in robbing peaceful travellers.

"So have I ofttimes thought," said the outlaw; "but in all this land is but one knight under whom I would serve—to wit, Messire Bertrand du Guesclin."

"And why under him specially?" asked the cavalier.

"Because," said the robber, with bitter emphasis, "he is the only noble who careth for us common folk, whom all the rest scorn and trample down; and also because he once saved the life of my poor brother, who is now a saint in heaven."

"Ay? How came that about?" asked the other, in a tone of undisguised interest.

The bandit, visibly pleased, told how his brother, a half-witted lad of the Rennes district, had once been attacked in the forest by a huge wolf; how Du Guesclin, then a mere boy, had slain the brute with his own hand; how the pilgrim-monk, Brother Michael, had appeared at that moment, and had bidden the simpleton follow him; and how the latter had thenceforth been his constant attendant.

"Meanwhile," went on the robber, with a black frown, "my father was cast into a boiling caldron at Dinan,* for defacing the king's coin; and my mother, who had gone thither to beg mercy for him, found none, and fell down and died where she stood. Then I, being left desolate, and having small love for the great folk who had made me so, became—what I am now, and must always be!"

The knight's voice failed as he strove to reply; but the hearty, sympathizing clasp in which he seized the outcast's hard brown hand said more than any words.

"What? Wilt thou take *my* hand?" said the felon, eyeing him wonderingly. "But thou knowest not all, even now."

Just then a fierce red glare broke through the deepening gloom, as a sudden turn brought them out in front of a huge fire, round which sat thirty wild forms armed to the teeth, who shouted hoarsely—

"Welcome back, captain; we have waited long for thee!"

"My task is done, and my pledge redeemed," said the grim guide to the knight. "I am the Black Wolf of the Forest!"

"And I," said the knight, raising his visor, "am Bertrand du Guesclin!"

* See chap. v. The outlaw had probably had no chance to learn that his father had been saved by Brother Michael.

CHAPTER XXII

A Clever Stratagem

At that renowned name, the bandits eyed each other doubtfully, as if hardly able to believe that the greatest warrior of the age stood among them in the guise of a simple knight-errant. But one glance at the harsh but striking features which (as the great captain often said in jest) no man who had once seen them could ever forget, carried conviction to all; and in a moment the savage gang were pressing round him with shouts of rough welcome, the Black Wolf himself being the foremost.

"Let him go free, captain!" cried the robbers; "it were sin and shame to take ransom from *him!*"

"What talk ye of ransom, lads?" said the chief, with a gruff chuckle. "Here is no question of any man's ransom but my own; for it is not he who is my captive, but I who am his."

"What! did he overcome thee in single fight?" cried a dozen voices at once, in blank amazement; for never before had the dreaded Black Wolf been conquered, and his wild followers had never dreamed that he could be.

"Ay, that did he!" said the Wolf, with a thoroughly characteristic enjoyment of his conqueror's prowess. "Marry, if ye doubt it, try him yourselves, any two of ye together; I'll warrant he will find work for both!"

But the robbers seemed quite satisfied with his testimony, and made no offer to put it to the proof.

"Hark ye, comrades," broke in Du Guesclin, "one of ye fetch me quickly a rough cloth or a wisp of straw, that I may rub down my good horse, which hath been sore toiled this day; and then, if it be supper-time with ye here, I would gladly eat a bit in your good company, for I am as hungry as a wolf in winter."

The blunt heartiness of the great soldier's address was just to the taste of these rough men, on whom fine words and courtly phrases would have been thrown away. His caring for his good steed, too, before thinking of his own needs, was what the rudest of them could appreciate; and in a trice he was seated among them as an honoured guest, as much at home in this den of thieves as at the brilliant Court of Brittany.

"Now, lads," cried he, as this strange picnic ended, "in requital of your good cheer, I will tell ye of a goodly sport that I have devised, which ye are the very men to carry out. With a few score tall fellows like you to aid me, I doubt not to bring it to a prosperous issue; and if I do, it will be a jest for the old wives of Bretagne to tell their

grand-children for many a day after we are dead and gone."

His project was plainly received by the outlaws as a first-rate joke; for, as he expounded it, his words were half-drowned by peal after peal of laughter; and, ere he ended, all the band (the Black Wolf included) had vowed to stand by him through thick and thin.

"Marry, this is the weather to bring to remembrance Christmas-tide in Merry England, where I would we all were now. There, at least, if we had cold and frost, we had good cheer as well; but in this heaven-forsaken land of briars and wolves (beshrew it and all that pertaineth to it!) we have none of the good cheer, and a double portion of cold to atone for the lack of it!"

So growled, as well as his chattering teeth would let him, the half-frozen gate-porter of Fougeray Castle (a Breton fortress lately captured by a detachment of the Duke of Lancaster's English army) on a bleak, gloomy winter evening.

"For my part," grunted the stout English archer whom he addressed, "had I but fire enow to keep the blood from freezing in my veins, I could make shift without the cheer thou speak'st of. Ere long we shall be at our last faggot, unless our captain and his men bring back some wood from their foraging this night."

"That were an unlikely chance," muttered the porter, with a gloomy shake of his grey head; "for he who tarries to cut wood when Bertrand du Guesclin is abroad, may be himself cut down instead. But at what look'st thou so earnestly, comrade?"

"Methinks my wish is granted as soon as spoken, like him that had a fairy godmother in the old tale," grinned the archer; "for yonder, if my eyes deceive me not, come six stout peasants, each with a lusty load of faggots!"

He was right, and even the crabbed old porter's sour face brightened as he saw that not only were the broad shoulders of the advancing peasants freighted with faggots, but that they were dragging with them a rude "sled," piled high with logs and bundles of firewood.

The drawbridge being down for the convenience of the English commandant (who was expected back every moment with his hundred foragers), the six grey-frocked, slouch-hatted, long-haired fellows came right up to the gate, and the foremost (a short, sturdy, clumsy man very much like a bear on hind legs) said humbly, in rude and broken French—

"Good sirs, if ye need wood, I pray ye of your grace to buy this that we have brought. Such valiant gentlemen, with the spoil of all France in their pouches, will not grudge a penny to us poor fellows!"

"Marry, ye have brought your wares to the right market!" laughed the archer. "Bring in your load, and when our captain returns (as he will speedily) I warrant he pays ye in right English fashion for such store of winter fuel."

With many a grunt and gasp (as if their strength were well nigh spent with dragging that heavy load up the steep path to the castle gate) the peasants tugged their sled forward. But, just inside the gate, they fairly stuck fast, leaving sled and log-pile (quite by accident, of course) just under the grate of the portcullis, which was thus kept from falling to bar the entrance.

"Ho there, lads!" cried the archer to three others who were lounging about the courtyard, "come and aid me and Peter Gateward to drag in this load, since these lazy fellows find it too hard for them!"

But as he spoke, down he went, felled to the earth as if crushed by a falling mountain; and the foremost peasant, flinging off his coarse frock, appeared in full armour. A tall man beside him, doing the same, uttered a cry like the howl of a wolf, which was instantly answered by the bursting of a throng of armed men from their ambush in the thickets below.

The next moment the three other archers and the porter fell in turn; but the staunch old warder, mortally hurt as he was, had clutched with his dying hand the cord of the alarm-bell, and rung a peal

that startled the whole garrison. The first men who came panting up made a frantic effort to let fall the portcullis; but the piled-up wood checked it midway, and in a moment more the shouting assailants burst in like a wave, echoing their leader's war-cry of "Notre Dame, Du Guesclin!"

Surprised, half-armed, without a leader, most of the English were beaten down and made prisoners almost ere they could draw weapon. A few made a desperate stand in the inner gateway, and fairly hemmed in Du Guesclin and the Black Wolf, who had charged headlong through it; but the two leaders, standing grimly back to back against them all, held their own till their men, having cleared the courtyard, came rushing to their aid; and so the castle was won.

But hardly was all over, when a distant trumpet blast came echoing from below, and the English commandant and his men were seen returning with their booty, in a careless, straggling fashion that told its own tale to Bertrand's keen eye.

Wounded as he was by a severe slash in the face, the hero sallied out upon them at once with a body of picked men, disguised in the dress of their English captives; and the trick was perfectly successful. The commandant himself fell by Du Guesclin's hand, and few of his men escaped death or capture.

"Well, lads," cried Bertrand, as he and his wild recruits sat down to the meal prepared for the

B 763

"THE SHOUTING ASSAILANTS BURST IN"

English leader, with many a hoarse laugh at this complete turning of the tables, "ye have right gallantly begun your new service, and a new service deserveth a new name. Henceforth let all men call ye 'Du Guesclin's Woodmen.'"

And the ex-outlaws, with shouts of approving laughter, accepted the title that was to make them famous in history.

CHAPTER XXIII

Possessed Swine

A FEAT like the capture of Fougeray Castle would have been enough for most men; but it could not satisfy Du Guesclin, to whom it was but the first step in the achievement of a far more daring design —nothing less than the defeat of the whole English army then besieging Rennes for the second time.

This would have seemed hopeless to any man but himself; for that army was one of the finest that England had ever sent forth, and led by the formidable Duke of Lancaster, a leader worthy of his father, Edward III. But the Breton hero's chivalrous spirit was stirred to its inmost depths by the peril of the beloved city where he had made his first essay in arms, and had received at the altar the hand of his beautiful bride; and he vowed that, come what might, it should not lack a helper in its need.

The stormy sunset was casting a red and angry glare on the dark ramparts of Rennes, on the evening after the capture of Fougeray, and the stout English beleaguerers were gathered round

their camp-fires over a very scanty supper, for by this time the besiegers were almost as much straitened as the besieged. Like true Englishmen, they were grumbling unstintedly at the cold and short commons; but, like true Englishmen, they were ready to face all this, and more, in the course of their duty.

One group, which lay nearest the town, seemed blither than the rest; for the music of a rollicking ballad came from the centre of the ring, and frequent bursts of laughter applauded the performance of a north-country minstrel, who was singing to his little three-stringed lute the old ballad of "Adam Bell and Clym of the Clough," which, celebrating as it did the exploits of three English bowmen, was always a favourite with the sturdy archers of Old England.

The singer had got well on with the third "fytte" (part) of his song, and had just reached the point where Adam and Clym, and their fellow-outlaw, William of Cloudeslee, go to the king to ask pardon for having "slain his fallow-deer" (wisely saying nothing of their greater misdeeds) and the king—who was at first for hanging them on the spot—pardons them at the queen's entreaty, and even invites them to dine with him—

> "They had not sitten but a while
> Certain without leasing (lying),
> When there came messengers from the north
> With letters to our king.

"And when they came before the king,
They kneeled down on their knee,
And said, 'Sir, your officers greet you well
From Carlisle in the north countree.'

"'How fares my justice?' said our king,
'And my sheriff also?'
'Sir, they be slain without leasing,
And many an officer mo' (more).

"'Who hath them slain?' said then our king.
'Anon that tell thou me.'
'Adam Bell, and Clym of the Clough,
And William of Cloudeslee.'

"'Alas for ruth,' said then our king,
'My heart is wondrous sore;
I had rather than a thousand pound
I had known of this before!

"'For I have granted them my grace,
And that forthinketh (repenteth) me;
But had I known all this before,
They had been hanged all three.'

"The king he opened the letter anon,
Himself he read it tho (then)
And he found how these three outlaws had slain
Three hundred men and mo'.

"First the justice, and the sheriff,
And the mayor of Carlisle town
Of all the constables and catchipolls
Alive were left not one.

"The bailiffs and the beadles too,
And sergeants of the law,
And forty foresters of the fee
These outlaws had y-slaw (slain)

"And broke his parks, and slain his deer,
Over all they chose the best;
So perilous outlaws as they were
Walked not by east nor west.

"When as our king this letter had read,
In heart he sighed full sore;
'Take up the table,' anon he bade,
'For now I may eat no more.'"

Just at this point (though many of the listeners knew the song as well as the minstrel himself) the growing laughter swelled into a full-mouthed, side-shaking roar that made the air ring. As it died away, a big spearman called out to the singer—

"Stand to it, Ralph! Here comes one of these French minstrels to have a bout with thee. At him boldly, for the honour of Old England!"

Into the circle of light cast by the fire came a thin, small, rather flighty-looking man in minstrel garb, with a lute slung at his back, beside whom stalked a huge form, a full head and shoulders taller, with a shaggy black beard, and clothes so tattered and grimed as to suggest a charcoal-burner's shirt.

"What ho, friends! who are ye? The Wandering Jew and his brother, with the dust of ages on your clothes?" cried a big archer, winking to his comrades to watch how he would "chaff" the new-comers.

"Thou hast guessed it, good sir," said the smaller man in French, with an impish grin; "we are, indeed, the Wandering Jew and his brother,

who——Ha! what see I? that face—those eyes——Brother, brother! our weary penance is ended at last!"

And, throwing his arms round the bantering archer's neck, he uttered a series of joyful howls worthy of a scalded cat.

"How now? what means this?" sputtered the astounded archer, struggling in vain to free himself from his new friend's embrace, while the rest gathered round, laughing loudly both at the heavy, ox-like bewilderment of the assailed man, and the monkeyish grimaces of the assailant.

"It was foretold to me a thousand years ago," cried the latter, rapturously, "that my weary wanderings should end, whenever I could find a greater fool than myself, and, the saints be praised, I have found him!"

This retort (which most of them knew French enough to understand) was received with a louder roar than ever, these thorough John Bulls being ever ready to enjoy a good hard hit, whether in words or blows; and they hastened to throw themselves between the rash joker and their aggrieved comrade, who, clenching a fist like a shoulder of mutton, seemed about to avenge himself on the spot.

"Nay, nay, Sim—fair play, lad! The first blow was thine, and he hath but hit thee back. See'st thou not he is a jester? and such are ever privileged men. And who art thou, friend?" said the

speaker to the jester's tall comrade. "Art thou come to join our ranks? Speak out if thou be a true man, though in truth thou look'st more like a thief!"

"The worse luck mine," said the black-bearded giant, with a hoarse laugh, "for ye English let no thieves thrive here but yourselves!"

The wit was just suited to the audience, and another loud laugh broke out, amid which the giant added coolly—

"If ye would know who I am, my name is Wolf, and I can bite!"

"Say'st thou so, Master Wolf?" cried a big man-at-arms, holding up his heavy spear. "Thou talk'st big, but can thy teeth crush a bone like that?"

The giant seized the strong shaft, and with one jerk of his mighty hands broke it like a biscuit.

"Not ill done for an outlander!" cried another man, patronizingly; for John Bull in the fourteenth century was even more John Bullish than now. "Hast a mind to join us, comrade? Thou wouldst be a right stalwart recruit."

"Of that hereafter," said the Black Wolf (for it was indeed he), "but first I would tell your general some news that I have learned of the doings of Bertrand du Guesclin."

"Ha! know'st thou aught of him?" cried a dozen voices at once. "What is thy news, then? Let us hear."

"Now, comrades, is this fair?" said the Wolf, in an injured tone. "If I be the first to bring news to your general, belike he will reward me well; but if a score of others know it already, what profit have I?"

"Thou wast not born yesterday, lad," said a tall archer, chuckling, "and if it be as thou say'st, I had best go call our captain, and report the matter to him."

As he tramped off, the jester said with a majestic air—

"I too will join your host, good fellows, and myself lead ye to battle. Ye have all heard of me; my name is Roland."

"What? the greatest of Charlemagne's Paladins?" cried a soldier, laughing. "Welcome to our camp, mighty champion; with thee among us, we have nought to fear!"

"Sing us the 'Song of Roland,' if thou be he," said another man, in a tone betwixt jest and earnest. "I heard it once from an old harper of Gascony, and, St. George be my speed! it stirred my blood like a trumpet!"

The jester at once struck up what was undoubtedly the Song of Roland in one sense, for it was his own composition, and certainly bore every mark of originality—

"My old grey mare made friends with a bear,
And together they went a-dancing,
But out came a snail, and their courage did fail,
When they saw the monster advancing.

"The miller-loon flew up to the moon,
So strong the wind was blowing ;
The tailor brave jumped into a grave
When he heard a cock a-crowing.

"The butterfly gave the ox a stab
That leech-craft could not cure, sirs ;
The robin he wept sore for a flea
Who died of biting a Moor, sirs !

"The man of the north went sailing forth
To find in the sea some forage ;
The man of the south he burned his mouth
With eating frozen porridge ! "

"Callest thou that the 'Song of Roland'?" said the man who had asked for it, with a broad grin.

"Marry, that do I!" cried Roland; for it was indeed Du Guesclin's adventurous jester, once more in an English camp in disguise. "It is the self-same song, as sung on the field of Hastings in the days of the great Duke William, by his good knight Taillefer, when we French went over and beat you English as flat as your own dough-cakes!"

This joke was less successful than his former ones. The rough soldiers bent their brows ominously, and muttered that their bow-strings were well fitted to scourge the malapertness out of a prating fool. But just then, luckily for poor Roland, their captain came up, and bade the new-comers follow him.

They were led straight to the Duke of Lancaster's tent, where the officer bade them wait while he went in to ask the duke's pleasure concerning

them. As they stood waiting, Roland (who, as we have seen, had learned English, though carefully concealing the fact) twisted his face into a grin of impish glee as he caught the words of an order that the duke was giving to one of his officers.

The next moment he and his comrade stood before the general, in reply to whose questions the Wolf told briefly Du Guesclin's capture of Fougeray and destruction of the English foraging party.

"And what wert thou doing the while, good fellow?" asked the duke, never dreaming that the man who had just given him so important a warning could be a foe in disguise.

"Watching for dead men to plunder," said the Wolf, with a frankness that brought a momentary smile to Lancaster's grave face.

"Be that as it may," said the duke, "thou hast brought us timely warning, and it shall not be forgotten. Sir Eustace," added he, to a knight beside him, "see these men well cared for, for they have done us good service."

Had he guessed what kind of "service" these men were really doing him, he would have hanged both on the spot; but he was not to know it till too late.

"Who goes there?" cried a sentry on the gate-tower of Rennes late that night.

"Ar fol goët" (the fool of the forest), said a voice from below.

A murmur of joyful surprise, only restrained by prudence from swelling into a shout, greeted this strange password; but to the captain of the gate it came like a reproach, for he was no other than Du Guesclin's cousin, Huon de St. Yvon, and this name (now a signal-word at which every Breton heart leaped) had been given to Bertrand long ago by himself and his dead brothers, in mockery of the boy's habit of roaming the woods alone.

"Art thou there, Bertrand?" said he, peering over the wall into the gloom.

"Nay, noble Sir Huon," replied the jester's familiar voice, "but Messire Bertrand is not far away, and hath sent thee a token, if thou wilt lower a cord to draw it up."

The token proved to be Bertrand's own signet-ring, stamped with his crest of the two-headed eagle, and it secured instant admittance for both men. Roland was at once summoned to a conference with De Penhoën, the commandant, from which the rough old Breton came forth with such a grin of mischievous glee as was never seen on his iron face before.

Meanwhile the Wolf was led by St. Yvon into the presence of a richly clad lady, whose face was so marvellously beautiful, and yet so sweet and saintly, that the fierce man started at the sight of it, and cried—

"So would our Blessed Lady look were she to come on earth once more. Nō marvel thy lord

overcame me in fight, when he had one like thee to pray for him!"

Sunrise showed to the wondering garrison a vast herd of wild swine, grunting, squeaking, and jostling, on the wide plain before the town. These had been driven in from the neighbouring woods by order of Lancaster, who, little dreaming that Roland had overheard and betrayed his plan, counted on the starving defenders making a sally to seize this tempting prey, and thus laying themselves open to a counter-attack that might win the town itself.

But crafty old Penhoën had set a soldier just within the postern-gate abutting on the river, that at this point washed the town wall, and as he began to pull the tail of a pig that he had with him, the injured animal expostulated in a series of squeals that might have been heard a mile away. No sooner did the swine outside hear their comrade's cries, than they all went galloping toward the town!

The English, who had never thought of letting this good meat really escape them, stared after the flying herd for a moment in blank bewilderment, and then flew in chase. But their shouting and trampling only scared the excited beasts yet more, and in a trice the whole herd had plunged into the river and were swimming to the postern.

"They be possessed!" cried an archer, "like

yon swine in Holy Writ, whereof good Father John used to tell."

"Be that tale true, then?" said another. "Sure, even a pig could ne'er be so foolish as to drown itself for nought!"

"Why, man, dost thou doubt Holy Writ?"

"Nay, not I; but since the thing befell so long ago, mayhap the tale be not true."

"Why, Dickon, thou talk'st like a heretic or a Saracen! Heed well thy tongue, for on such matters Holy Church knoweth no jesting. Hark ye, comrade; I will give ye proof of yon tale such as would convince St. Thomas the Doubter himself. When I was but a lad, father bought a pig at Guildford Fair, and bade me lead it home. What doth Gaffer Pig but twitch the cord out of my hand, and send me sprawling in the dirt? And then he upset a child that stood by, and galloped right over an old wife and her egg-basket, breaking every egg therein, and scared the nag whereon a gay spark was riding past, whereby the spark gat a fall that brake him a rib or twain; and after all these pranks he plunged into the river and well-nigh drowned himself, even as yon swine are doing now. Now, lad, if one pig did all that of his own mind, what think ye a whole herd would do with the devil in 'em?"

Just then this theological discussion was cut short by an unexpected turn of the adventure.

As the swimming porkers neared the postern-

gate, whence the unseen pig's squeals were still issuing, it was suddenly flung open, and a light portable bridge thrust out, on to which the wild hogs clambered, vanishing through the gate—which was instantly shut on them—before the very eyes of the baffled and enraged English, while the jester bowed gracefully from the ramparts to the exasperated pursuers, and gravely thanked them for supplying the hungry town with food.

CHAPTER XXIV

Through the Darkness

FIERCELY did Lancaster chafe at the mishap by which his cherished plan, so far from bringing about the fall of the town, had re-victualled it so amply that the besiegers seemed in more peril of famine than the besieged. He had sworn never to turn his back on the town till he had planted his banner on its walls; and now he seemed farther from it than ever.

As he sat gloomily in his tent that afternoon, trying vainly to devise a fresh plan, he was told that a man wished to speak with him, and two soldiers brought in the Black Wolf.

"Ha! thou here still, fellow? They told me thou hadst fled to the French."

"Say rather I have fled *from* them, your highness," said the iron-nerved bandit, meeting the stern duke's searching look without a sign of fear. "My comrade and I were carried captive into the town last night by a scouting party of the rogues, and he (worse luck) is still in their hands; but I brake prison and escaped, having learned somewhat

that may aid your highness to take vengeance on yon scurvy old commandant, who threatened to hang me like a dog."

"Say'st thou so?" cried the duke, his spirits rising as suddenly as they had fallen. "Let us hear quickly, then, what thou hast learned."

The Wolf, carrying out with all the cunning that his wild and hunted life had taught him the subtle scheme devised by Du Guesclin's ready brain, told, with a blunt frankness which might have deceived the shrewdest man alive, that the "rogue of a commandant" had been nerved to his stubborn defence by the hope of relief from an army which Du Guesclin and other Breton barons were raising; that this army was now on its way, hoping to take the English by surprise; and that he was ready to guide the duke and a chosen body of his troops to surprise it in turn.

This was quite enough for the energetic general, who never thought of doubting so plausible a story, and had no suspicion that this seemingly zealous ally was sent on purpose to mislead him. Ere night fell, Lancaster himself and the bulk of his army, guided by the Wolf, were on their march to intercept the relieving force, little thinking, in their joyful confidence of victory, that they were doing just what their enemies wished.

Just before midnight they reached the narrow, wooded defile through which, as their guide said, the French army must approach their camp. Here

they halted, and, not daring to betray their presence by kindling fires, officers and men shivered through two long, cold, weary hours of vain expectation.

The night wore on, and still there was no sign of a foe; and the half-frozen English began to glance impatiently at the spot where, dimly visible in the faint moonlight, loomed the long grey mantle in which their guide had wrapped himself as he lay down. Could the French have taken another road and escaped them? Could their guide be mistaken? or was he betraying them?

The same growing suspicion disturbed their leaders, and even the duke himself, who suddenly called out—

"Bring hither yon caitiff guide; if he hath played false, he shall feed the crows on the highest tree of the forest."

One of his attendant knights, with two or three stout soldiers, flew to the sleeping guide, and, bending over him, shouted—

"Up, fellow! His highness would speak with thee."

But the slumbering form never moved.

Driven beyond patience, the knight clutched at his shoulder. But, to his utter horror, the assailant's hand found nothing to grasp; the cloak sank in at his touch, and, as it fell aside, they could all see that there was no one beneath it.

In that superstitious age, there could be but

one explanation of such a prodigy. The hardy soldiers grew pale as death, and the knight, crossing himself tremulously, said in a voice that he vainly tried to steady—

"The Evil One himself hath been among us; let us pray God to protect us."

Just then broke into the ring the stern duke himself, furious at the delay in obeying his orders. But his face changed as he heard the tale, and the veteran, whom no peril could shake, stood mute and motionless beneath the spell of a terror that was not of this world.

But that spell was suddenly and terribly broken. Through the dead silence of the gloomy winter night came faintly a dull, far-off roar, coming from the camp that they had left; and a fierce red glare, waxing broader and brighter every moment, broke through the gloom in the same direction.

"We are betrayed! our camp is attacked!" roared the duke, stamping and waving his clenched hands like a madman. "Back to it for your lives."

But with all their haste, they came too late; the mischief was done.

In spite of the darkness, the Wolf (having slipped away from his English companions, and left his cloak and a heap of dead leaves to represent him) had gone straight to the spot where he was to meet Du Guesclin, who heard with stern joy the success of his plan for drawing away half the English army to repel an imaginary attack, and

lost no time in setting off to fall on the other half by surprise.

It was past midnight, and the English left to guard the camp were nearly all asleep in careless confidence, and dreaming of stormed towns and rich booty, when a drowsy sentry, leaning on his spear, heard a rustle in the thicket beside him, and ere he could utter his challenge, a crushing blow smote him down, while a swarm of dark figures, bursting from the shadowy wood, dashed down into the unprepared camp like a cataract.

So complete was the surprise, that many of the English were slain or taken ere they were fully awake; and few had time either to spring up or seize their weapons. Instantly all was confusion. Tents were overthrown, horses cut loose, waggon-wheels broken, military engines disabled; and at last the conquerors, with a mighty shout of "Notre Dame, Du Guesclin!" swept away the few who still resisted, and set the camp on fire.

It was the blaze of this fire that had startled Lancaster and his men, and sent them hurrying back. But the same blaze had called to the ramparts the defenders of Rennes, to whom it was a token of deliverance; and the shrewd old commandant, guessing what had happened, at once got five hundred of his best men under arms, charging their leader, Huon de St. Yvon, to watch the fit moment for a sally on the English rear, while Du Guesclin pressed them in front.

But only by the slackening of the English war-cry, and the swell of the answering French shout, could the anxious watchers on the walls guess how the fight was going; for of its actual progress little or nothing could be seen. Only at times did they catch a dim and doubtful glimpse of shadowy masses of men surging up against each other, clashing, parting, meeting once more, while a keen glitter of steel ran through the gloom like a shower of flying sparks. Ever and anon, a whirl of struggling forms came rushing athwart the line of light cast by the rising flames, clearly visible for one instant, and then swallowed by the blackness once more.

But as the flames rose higher, the issue of the fray was no longer doubtful.

Bertrand and his men had won their way through the English force between them and the town, and the final battle was now raging round a number of store-waggons just brought in by the English from the surrounding country, with supplies which would be a priceless gift to the starving town. The English, on the other hand, knew that if that food reached the town all their toil would be thrown away; and they fought like tigers to beat the assailants back.

"Lads!" roared Du Guesclin, "within yon walls are women weeping over their starving children, and here is the food that can save them!"

Fired by this appeal, the Bretons rushed on again, and the English put forth all their might to bar the way. The fight was at its hottest, when Huon saw his chance, and, flinging open the gate, came like a thunderbolt on the English ranks with a shout of "St. Yves for Bretagne!"

Thus attacked on both sides at once, the stubborn besiegers began to give way. The Bretons pressed on—the English fell back—the precious supplies drew nearer and nearer to the town. Already all seemed won, when from the gloom broke a hoarse roar of thousands of voices, "Lancaster! Lancaster! St. George for England!" and the duke and his men, just returned from their fruitless quest, came charging to the rescue.

And now the fight grew fierce and terrible; for all knew that on this last struggle hung the fate of the besieged town, and every man fought as if the might of the whole host were in his single arm. Had not Lancaster's men been spent with long marching and want of sleep, it would have gone hard with Du Guesclin's handful of heroes; and even as it was, all their valour barely sufficed to bear up against the threefold odds that beset them. The Wolf and his band (Bertrand's life-guard all through that fearful night) stood like an iron wall between the tide of assault and the precious waggons; but, man on man, the devoted band fell before their swarming assailants, and as their ranks thinned, Du Guesclin's men began to

give way in turn, while the English pressed on with shouts of victory.

Driven to desperation, Bertrand plunged headlong into the living sea of fierce faces and tossing weapons, dealing death at every blow. But, in that maddening hurly-burly, few saw the movement, and fewer still followed it; and in a moment he was hemmed in on every side, and not one of his own men near but Huon and the Wolf.

Suddenly Bertrand's quick ear caught, amid all that infernal din, a dull groan behind him, and he turned just in time to see the Wolf drop his axe and fall to the earth!

Quick as thought, Du Guesclin clutched the fainting man, and dragged him up by main force on to his own steed; and then he turned so fiercely on his foes that for an instant his single arm checked the whole tide of battle.

"Huon!" he shouted, "stand by me, as thou art true knight and Christian man."

Huon answered nobly to the call, striking right and left with the force of a giant, and never once in vain. But the English closed sternly round them, and all seemed over with the gallant pair, when the fortune of this strange fight turned once more.

Till then old De Penhoën had warily kept the rest of his men well in hand; but now he flung caution to the winds, and, hastily mustering every soldier within the walls, burst forth like a whirlwind

on the disordered English just as they thought the victory won!

In a moment the ring of savage faces and cruel spears that shut in Du Guesclin and Huon melted away like a dream, and a gruff voice said behind them—

"Cheer up, good Sir Bertrand; thou hast stood at bay like a stag of ten, and yon English wolves shall not have thee!"

In fact, this sudden charge of fresh men on wearied ones decided the battle. Confounded by so many successive attacks, the English thought themselves assailed by a new army, and gave way once more; and ere they could rally again, the work was done.

Already the precious store-waggons (in one of which Bertrand had gently laid the helpless Wolf) were close to the open gate—and now the foremost was actually within it—and now, amid the whiz of crossbow-bolts from the walls and the hiss of arrows from the plain, the triumphant cheers of the garrison and the savage cries of the baffled pursuers, the heroes of this marvellous feat struggled wearily into the sheltering town, and the gate clanged behind them.

"Spare our lives, noble sir! We have lost all else that we had in the world!" cried one of the peasant waggon-drivers, as he and the others threw themselves at Du Guesclin's feet.

"Why, how now, lads?" cried Bertrand, with

that blunt, hearty frankness that always made him popular with the common people. "Ye are Bretons, like me, and why should I be wroth with my own folk? If, as ye say, ye have lost all, it fits me better to aid than to punish you. What have ye done amiss?"

"We drove these waggons to the English camp; but what could we do? The spear was at our throats! Leave us our lives, noble knight; we have nought else to lose!"

"As God hears me, who hath delivered me this night," said the hero, solemnly, "not a hair of your heads shall be touched, and all ye have lost shall be made good, if it cost me my last crown. While Bertrand du Guesclin hath a coin in his purse, any man that is poor and needy is welcome to share it!"

The poor peasants kissed his hands with broken thanks, and the rough soldiers around set up a cheer that made the air ring.

When day dawned on that wild scene, it revealed a sight at which the oldest English veteran stood aghast. Half the camp lay in ashes, blotting the clear sky with its smoke. The military engines, constructed with so much labour and cost, were shattered and useless. Hundreds of the duke's best men had fallen, and so many horses were carried off or disabled that half his knights were dismounted; and, worse than all, of the supplies brought in at such cost of toil and blood, not a morsel was left.

But, furious as the great general was to see the labours of months destroyed in a night, and all his hopes of winning the town blasted in the very moment of success, the uppermost feeling in his brave English heart was an honest, manly admiration of the gallant foe whose skill and courage had triumphed over his utmost efforts; and that admiration rose higher still when some English soldiers, who had been shut into the town with the Bretons on the previous night, and dismissed unharmed at dawn by Bertrand himself, came back with the news of his kindness to the peasants.

"So help me St. George!" cried the duke, "since lance was first lifted in this land, there hath been no such gentle and perfect knight as this same Du Guesclin, and gladly would I tell him so myself. Ho there! let my herald presently go up to the town with trumpet-sound and banner displayed, and say to Messire Bertrand du Guesclin that John of Gaunt prays him to grace our board with his presence this day as a right welcome and honoured guest."

CHAPTER XXV

A Case of Conscience

THE duke's herald was at once admitted by the old commandant, to whom he announced himself as the bearer of a message to Du Guesclin from the Duke of Lancaster.

"Thou wouldst speak with Messire Bertrand thyself?" asked De Penhoën, with the ghost of a smile flickering over his iron face.

"Even so," said the herald, with a dignity befitting his office, then one of the most important in existence.

"Go down there and thou wilt find him," said the old Breton, pointing to the courtyard with a grin that puckered his hard visage till it looked like the carved spout of a cathedral.

Down went the herald, to find himself amid a throng of rough-looking, bare-armed fellows, who were chopping up one of the captured carts to replenish their scanty stock of firewood. After looking in vain for any sign of Du Guesclin among the ragged, dirty gang, he was fain to apply to a short, sturdy, phenomenally ugly man in a greasy

leathern jerkin (with his head and left arm bandaged), who, while directing the labours of the rest, seemed himself to work as hard as any one.

"I pray thee, good fellow," said he condescendingly, "tell me where I may find Sir Bertrand du Guesclin; I have to speak with him."

"Speak on, then," said the wood-chopper, wiping his face; "I am he."

"Thou?" echoed the herald, recoiling. "Thou the great Du Guesclin? So help me St. George, thou look'st more like a robber!"

"Dar'st thou call our Bertrand a robber, malapert knave?" roared one of the wood-cutters. "Say it again, and we will strip off those gay plumes of thine, and thy own jackass hide to boot."

"Hold, lads! a herald is sacred," said Bertrand, with a jovial laugh. "And, in sooth, he has hit the mark in calling me robber, since I plundered his master's camp last night. If thou believe me not, Sir Herald, look if this be like one of Du Guesclin's blows."

And one blow of his axe cut in two, as easily as if slicing a ripe pear, a log as thick as the herald's own thigh.

Convinced at last that this ugly, clumsy, grimy dwarf was really the great leader he sought, the crestfallen herald gave his message (to which Bertrand replied with a knightly courtesy that, with all his soldier-like bluntness, never failed him on occasion), and retired much abashed, and not

a little scandalized, to find the greatest captain of an age famous for ostentatious splendour dressed worse than a scarecrow.

Then Du Guesclin, having arrayed himself for his call on the duke, went to ask after his wounded comrades, Huon and the Wolf; for, as to his own hurts, even the entreaties of his gentle and beautiful wife (to whom he had thus cut his way through an army) could only prevail on him to bandage them hastily, though most men would have thought them serious enough.

Finding his cousin better, though still weak, Bertrand next inquired after the Wolf, who was being nursed by Lady Tiphaine du Guesclin herself. She met her husband at the door of the sick-room with her finger on her lips.

"How fares he?" whispered Bertrand.

"He sleeps, thank Heaven; and if the sleep last and he wake refreshed, he shall do well, please God, though he is sore stricken. But thou, my Bertrand, whither goest thou?"

"To the English camp," said her lord, with a boyish grin. "His highness of Lancaster is so gracious as to hold my ugly visage an ornament to his table. Methinks he had gone nearer the mark had he bidden thee in my stead."

"To the English camp?" echoed Tiphaine, with a slight tremor in her sweet voice. "Promise me, then, my own true knight, that thou wilt fight no combat with their champions, even if they provoke

thee to it. Bethink thee" (and she laid her soft hand fondly on the grim warrior's mighty arm) "that thy life belongs to the whole realm, and may not be lightly perilled against every hothead who would win renown by crossing steel with the great Du Guesclin."

"Why, what is this that thou say'st, lady mine?" quoth Bertrand, with an air of innocent surprise. "Think'st thou that I, of all men, am one to seek causeless quarrels?"

In fact, it was good Bertrand's firm belief that he was by nature a very peaceable man, and that his countless duels were forced on him by others, and in no way due to his own love of fighting.

"Be that as it may," said his wife, turning aside her beautiful face to hide the arch smile that flitted over it, "I have thy promise, have I not?"

"Thou hast it, sweetheart," said Bertrand, kissing her. "Adieu till evening. I say not, 'God be with thee,' for He is with thee evermore."

Tiphaine's precaution came just in time; for though John of Gaunt and most of his knights welcomed Bertrand with the courtesy due to their noblest foe, there was one who bent on him a grim and lowering look, boding ill for the peace of the banquet.

This uncourteous knight was a tall, strong, bulky man (evidently a practised warrior), who bore himself with the haughtiness of one bent on exacting from every man the deference he deemed

his due. He was presented to Du Guesclin as Sir Thomas of Canterbury, a name that Bertrand had not heard before, though history has now linked it inseparably with his own.

The moment the Breton met Canterbury's defiant look he saw that this man meant to pick a quarrel with him, nor did the Englishman lose any time in setting about it.

"Health and long life to our honoured guest, Sir Bertrand du Guesclin!" cried the duke, standing up with a brimming goblet in his hand.

The rest cordially echoed the toast, but Sir Thomas's voice was heard to add an unexpected postscript—

"Health and long life to Sir Bertrand du Guesclin, and may he ever have as dark a night to aid him to foray a camp!"

The sneering tone and insulting look left no doubt of the speaker's meaning. The duke frowned slightly, and all faces clouded at so flagrant a breach of good breeding—all the more offensive because couched in terms so ambiguous as to make it difficult to resent. Only Bertrand was cool as ever.

"I thank thee for thy kind wish, good Sir Thomas," said he; "and in truth, the dark night did me good service."

So pleasant was his tone, so friendly his look, that even the quarrelsome Canterbury could find no offence in either; and the company, seeing a

man of such proverbial courage bent on avoiding all dispute at their general's table, admired his courtesy and self-command as much as they condemned their countryman's rudeness.

But Sir Thomas, though foiled for once, was not to be so easily baulked; and, a few minutes later, he said pointedly to Du Guesclin himself—

"I pray thee, good Sir Bertrand, what men were they who followed thee yester-eve? Some of my archers saw among the dead certain men whom they held to belong to a gang of robbers that have long haunted these woods; but I can never believe that any true knight would hold fellowship with such thievish scum!"

This time the affront was too direct to be mistaken; and for a moment Du Guesclin's eyes rested on his insulter with a look that made the swaggering Englishman, brave as he really was, tingle to his very finger-tips. But Bertrand controlled himself with a mighty effort, and replied as calmly as ever—

"Gramercy for thy care of my fair fame, Sir Thomas; but thine archers were in the right. The men that followed me yester-eve were the robbers of whom thou speak'st, whose chief pledged himself to me, when I had somewhat the better of him in single fight, to be at my command, he and his men, and do me masterful service in war, which they did all the more because—as one of them said with that discourtesy and rudeness of speech that

is ever the mark of a common churl" (Sir Thomas winced visibly)—"in this land the English let no thieves thrive but themselves!"

The stifled laugh which ran around the board showed that, in the opinion of all present, the bully's insolence had been well requited; but Canterbury's sun-browned face glowed like heated iron, and he broke out fiercely—

"Whoso dares speak in the same breath of thieves and Englishmen, I defy him to——"

"Sir Thomas," said the duke, sternly, "hast thou forgot at whose table thou sittest? Who gave thee leave to set thyself up as England's champion, when thy king's son is here in presence? I counsel thee to rein up thy brawling humour, lest I curb it for thee!"

"Nay," said Du Guesclin, "let not your highness be wroth with this good knight, if he be minded to bid me to a friendly trial of manhood. It grieves me much that I cannot pleasure him, having promised my liege lady to fight no combat this day; and if any man hath a mind to think Bertrand Du Guesclin a coward for that cause, e'en let him."

"If any man speak so of thee in my hearing, noble Sir Bertrand," cried John of Gaunt, "I will myself challenge him to the combat, and will so deal with him that he shall never offend in such wise again."

"I heartily thank your highness; but lest I be

held a niggard by this good knight, in seeming to shun the cheer he offereth me, I will pray your courtesy to let each of us strike one blow on helm or mail in all good fellowship, that so we may in some sort prove each other's might, even if we cannot do so blade to blade."

The duke (to whose chivalrous spirit this offer was just suited) agreed at once. Two helmets, the strongest that could be found, were placed on two stout blocks at the tent door; and the whole party trooped out to watch the trial.

"Strike thou the first blow, good Sir Thomas," said Bertrand; "it is what thou art ever wont to do."

"I thank your courtesy, fair sir," said the Englishman, who, finding himself treated with such studied courtesy after all his rudeness, was beginning to feel ashamed of it.

Down came his axe, cleaving the tempered steel like paper, and biting so deep into the hard block as well-nigh to hew it in twain. A shout of applause greeted the stroke, and Bertrand said with his usual frankness—

"Well stricken, gallant sir! He who would match thee runneth sore risk of being shamed; but, for the honour of Bretagne, I will e'en try my fortune."

His wounded arm was sorely against him; but the thought of striking for his country's honour in the presence of foes doubled his great strength,

and the blow fell like a thunderbolt. The strong helmet flew in pieces like an egg-shell, and down went the terrible axe through steel and wood and all, burying itself a good foot in the hard earth below.

There was a pause of mute amazement (for never yet had the lookers-on, though bred where good blows were in plenty, seen such a stroke), and then broke forth a shout of hearty, manly admiration, to which the duke himself added the full might of his voice.

Sir Thomas himself, with all his bluster, was too brave a man not to admire such prowess even in a foe; and he said frankly enough—

"Thou art the better man, gentle sir; and, by St. George, I have good cause to be glad that my head was not in yon helm when thine axe smote it."

He had cause to remember those words two years later, when, in the famous single combat still commemorated by the conqueror's statue in Dinan market-place, he was beaten to the earth by Du Guesclin's resistless arm, and owed to the Duke of Lancaster's intercession a life justly forfeited by a wanton breach of truce, as dishonouring to his own fame as to that of England.

Just then up came a single rider at full speed, and, bowing low to the duke, gave him a sealed letter, which Lancaster read with visible emotion.

"This letter, Sir Bertrand, brings me word of

a truce betwixt France and England, and of my royal father's command to raise this siege," said he, not sorry, perhaps, to have so good an excuse for giving up his now hopeless enterprise. "I can claim no merit for obeying, for thou hast already made all my labours vain. But herein lieth my difficulty. I have vowed, as English prince and belted knight, not to turn from these walls till I plant my banner on them; and rather than break my word, I would bide here as long as Messire Agamemnon and his knights before Troy."

To Du Guesclin, as to every man of that age, such a vow was sacred, and, once made, must be carried out to the letter. For a moment he looked staggered by this new dilemma; but his ready wit soon found a remedy.

"If that be all, let it not trouble your highness. What hinders you to come into the town in friendly wise, plant your banner on the wall, and then take it down again and go your way in peace? So is your vow fulfilled, and your honour has no stain."

The duke laughed at the clever device, and lost no time in carrying it out. He came up to the gate with a few of his knights, was courteously received there by De Penhoën, planted his banner on the wall, solemnly took it down again, and went back to his camp quite satisfied!

Then Bertrand, seeing that the besiegers were really breaking up their camp and preparing to depart, went back to his quarters, at the door of

which his stout seneschal met him with a very gloomy face.

"I have heavy news for thee, messire. Thou art about to lose a staunch comrade."

"Not Huon?" cried the hero, clenching his hands till the joints cracked.

"No, thank God; the Sire de St. Yvon is mending apace. But he whom they call the Black Wolf——"

Bertrand waited to hear no more, but flew up the narrow stair, thrusting aside the strong soldier like a child.

"Lives he?" asked he of his wife, as she came forward to meet him.

"He lives as yet," she replied sadly; "but his sickness hath taken an ill turn, and——"

"I could have better spared a better man," said Du Guesclin, in the very words that Shakespeare has immortalized. "Must he die? Is there no hope?"

"None, unless God work a miracle to save him. But who are we, my Bertrand, to question the will of God? In mercy, it may be, hath this brave man been called hence while his heart was right and his purpose good, lest he should fall back into his former sins. God's will be done!"

But the "Amen" that Bertrand strove to utter died on his lips, and he silently followed his lady into the chamber of death.

The Wolf's grim features were already white

and sunken, and his mighty frame lay helpless as a child; but his eyes glowed with a wild light, and words of terrible meaning broke from his lips.

"They are great, and rich, and powerful, and their life is full of pleasure. What know they of how a man feels who has had no pleasure in life from the birth-hour to the grave? They call me 'Wolf;' but who made me so? When a wolf tears and slays one of those who have hunted and wounded him, and driven him to lie cold and hungry in his darksome den, what doth he but what yourselves have taught him?"

"Hear'st thou, Tiphaine?" said Du Guesclin, drawing a quick breath as if in sudden pain. "And it is all true, too!"

"Not true of thee, Bertrand; thou hast ever been good to the poor."

"But what of those who have not?" said he, gloomily. "Surely for all these things there will one day be a heavy reckoning."

Tiphaine laid her cool, soft hand on the dying man's fevered brow, and in the haggard eyes shone a sudden gleam of joyful recognition.

"God has sent an angel to receive my soul," he murmured, "unworthy though I be of such grace; but 'tis a black soul for thy pure white hands to touch, holy one."

"For such souls our Lord died on the cross," she replied gently. "Peace be with thee."

"And when thou meet'st my father yonder,"

broke in Bertrand, vehemently, "tell him from me that never had man truer comrade than I have found in thee, and that——"

Here the brave man's voice failed, and—for all emotions of that downright age, good or evil, worked as openly as those of children—the stern eyes, that had never blenched in the face of death, let fall tear after tear on the nerveless hand that he clasped in both his own.

"Lady," said the dying bandit, straining his failing eyes towards Tiphaine's face, "bind, I pray thee, thy sash around my neck, and let it be buried with me; for men say we shall be sore changed yonder, and I would fain have some token whereby God may know me for thy liegeman!"

And she, without a word, did as he asked.

An hour later all was over; but the rescued citizens did not forget what they owed to the man who had given his life to save them. All Rennes swelled the train that bore him to his last resting-place in the churchyard of Sainte-Melaine; and over his grave Du Guesclin set up, at his own cost, a fair tablet of hewn stone, inscribed with an epitaph that had indeed been fully earned—

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

CHAPTER XXVI

Crescent and Cross

On the same day that witnessed the deliverance of Rennes, the rising sun, lighting up a wild mountain pass in southern Spain, revealed two shadowy figures crouching behind a huge briar-clad rock, halfway up the hillside. Both kept glancing impatiently down the gorge, as if expecting some one from that side, but both seemed anxious to avoid being seen themselves.

The watchers had the light hair and fair faces of northern Europe, and wore armour of English fashion, which made their presence all the stranger in a region where, at that time, any Christian who dared enter it took his life in his hand. For the Moorish power in Spain, though tottering, still held all Andalusia; and hence the passes of the Sierra Morena (which, dividing that province from New Castile, formed the frontier between Christian and Moslem) were then, owing to the ceaseless raids of the light Saracen cavalry, one of the most perilous regions in Spain.

"They come not yet," said the taller man, who

wore the gold spurs of a knight, glancing down the pass for the tenth time; "but they will doubtless haste to cross the border with their booty ere daylight overtake them. They cannot be much longer now."

"Unless they have taken another road and escaped us," growled the other, a square, sturdy man-at-arms, whose dinted armour told of hard service.

"I think not so," said the knight, calmly. "Yon shepherd who brought word of their coming must know these mountains well, and has little cause to love the Saracen robbers, who have taken his all; and this is their nearest way to their own land. Trust me, by this pass they will come; and while a hope is left of meeting them, and rescuing our fellow-Christians whom they are carrying into bondage, here will I abide, as surely as my name is Alured de Claremont."

It was indeed Brother Michael's penitent knight, who had had many a strange experience since that memorable evening on the hilltop above Carcassonne.

Setting himself zealously to the work assigned him by the pilgrim-monk, he had led his wild followers into Spain, and thrown himself, heart and soul, into the age-long Crusade, by which the Spanish Christians were winning back their own land, foot by foot, from its Moslem conquerors. No task was too hard for him, no peril too great;

and though ever foremost in danger, he seemed always to escape unharmed.

So striking, in fact, was this strange immunity, that his men believed him made proof against weapons by the special grace of Heaven; and his Moorish foes were equally convinced that he was a mighty enchanter, against whom neither skill nor valour could avail. Such, indeed, was their superstitious awe of "The White Knight" (as they called him from his bright armour and the snowy plume in his helmet), that when he was known to be abroad, the boldest Saracen raiders were chary of venturing over the border.

It was to intercept one of these raiding parties that he was now in ambush with some of his best men; for the rocky ridges flanking the gorge, voiceless and lifeless as they seemed beneath their shroud of thin white mist, were all alive with armed men, ready to leap from their covert at the first gleam of steel far down the shadowy valley, and straining their ears for the hoof-tramp of the returning spoilers.

At last their patience was rewarded. Faint and far, through the tomb-like silence, came a dull, distant sound, growing ever louder and nearer, and shaping itself into the trample of hoofs, and the rattle of loose stones, and the ring of steel, and the hoarse voices of men, till a line of turbaned riders began to emerge like spectres from the ghostly dimness.

And now the hovering mists rolled away before the mounting sun like the smoke of a battle, revealing at last to the unseen watchers above the whole length of the Moorish train.

A sad and fearful sight it was, but only too common in that age of unceasing war. Every weapon was red with murder, and on many a spear-point was the head of some brave man who had vainly defended his home against a foe to whom pity was unknown. The spoils of the foray dangled at the saddles of the fierce Moslems, whose dark, lean faces glowed with savage triumph; and mingling with their exulting shouts came cruel taunts and ferocious curses, flung at the wretched captives who, with bound hands and bleeding feet, toiled wearily up the steep, stony path, goaded by the merciless spear-points of the ruffians who were dragging them away to hopeless slavery.

More than one of the unseen watchers above felt a pang of remorse at the thought of how often he had himself been guilty of the same outrages as the "heathen hounds" whom he abhorred; but this only inflamed the righteous wrath of these wild free-lances. Many a strong hand gripped its sword-hilt as if it would dint the metal, and many a stout archer drew his arrow to the head as he took sure aim at the savage throng below, who, with God's name on their lips, were doing the devil's work.

"Mash' Allah!" (praise to God) cried a tall,

gaunt, wild-looking Moor, evidently one of the leaders. "Yet one short league, and we are on our own ground once more, and then let the Christian dogs follow us if they will!"

"They will follow to their death, if they do!" said a second man, with a savage grin. "There is yet room on our spear-points for more of their unsainted heads, and the more the better!"

Just then their talk was interrupted by a scream of pain from a thin, pale, worn-looking woman amid the train of captives, who had gashed her bare foot deeply on one of the sharp stones that strewed the flinty path.

"Wilt thou be ever stumbling, mother of asses?" roared the fierce Moor, who held the cord that bound her bruised and bleeding wrists. "Get forward quickly, or thou shalt smart for it!"

And with his heavy spear-shaft he struck the poor creature savagely across the shoulders, forcing from her a fresh shriek of agony.

But hardly was the cowardly blow dealt, when a shaft, whizzing from the thicket above, pierced through steel and bone to the ruffian's cruel heart; and, with a shout that made the air ring, the avengers came dashing down the hillside on their startled foes.

It was a terrible scene that followed; for in that death-grapple of warring creeds and races, there could be no thought of mercy. Taken by surprise, and attacked on both sides at once, the Saracens

had not a chance; and had not some of the assailants been drawn away from the fight by their eagerness to free the fainting captives, not one Moor would have been left. As it was, the few whose knowledge of the country enabled them to plunge into the thickets and escape, were but a miserable gleaning of that great harvest of death.

While the fight lasted, Alured's black steed and white plume were foremost in the fray, bearing down all before them. He was just cutting the cords that coupled some of the hindmost captives, when he came face to face with a tall, stately Moorish cavalier, splendidly armed and mounted, whose green turban showed that he claimed kindred with the Prophet himself.

This was the leader of the Saracen troop, who, riding with the rearguard, had taken what he held to be the post of danger, these over-confident raiders never dreaming of being attacked in front. Without a word, the two chiefs clashed together, each seeing in the other the destroyer of his race and the foe of his religion.

For a few moments, the rattle of their blows on helm and harness was as quick and fierce as the patter of hailstones on a roof. But so equally were they matched, that no one could have told how the fray was likely to go; and at last, as if by mutual consent, they paused for breath.

"Christian," said the Moor, with stern admiration, "I would thou wert riding with the servants

of the Prophet instead of these dogs of Spain, for thou art the best warrior I have ever faced!"

"I may well say the same of thee," cried the Englishman, heartily, in the Saracen's own tongue, with which his campaigns on the Moorish border had made him familiar. "Wilt thou yield to my mercy? See, thy men are scattered, and the day is ours!"

In fact, the Moorish leader was now the only man left fighting, and around him De Claremont's men were closing on every side. But not one offered to lay hand on him, it being so fully recognized a custom of that age for two commanders to get up a private fight of their own amid the general battle, that no one ever dreamed of interfering with it.

"Yield?" echoed the Moor, disdainfully; "were I alone in the field against ye all, to no unbeliever, even to so good a champion as thou, should Ismail El Zagal (Ishmael the Valiant) yield himself!"

"Art thou indeed El Zagal?" cried Alured, eyeing him with a new interest; for though he had never met this man before, there were few Spanish knights on the whole Andalusian border who had not some marvellous tale to tell of his feats of arms.

"I am," said the emir; "and thou, Christian chief—thou too hast surely a name that is famed in war. May I know it?"

"I am he whom thy people call 'The White Knight.'"

"The White Knight?" cried El Zagal, with a fierce gleam in his large black eyes. "Nay, if thou be indeed that fell foe of my race and of the true faith, my blade shall reach thee, though Azraël (the Angel of Death) claim me the next moment!"

Down came his blade on Alured's helmet, with such a thunder-stroke that the knight reeled in his saddle, and his barred visor, broken from its clasps, fell clanking to the earth.

But, so far from seconding a blow that had brought victory within his grasp, the Moor let fall his terrible scimitar, and stared at his foe's revealed face in mute and stony horror. Had the falling visor disclosed a skeleton or a demon, instead of the knight's noble face, El Zagal could not have looked more astounded and dismayed.

Alured, though not in the least understanding his foe's sudden panic, was swift to profit by it. Quick as thought, he clutched the emir's wrists, while the Moor, as if actually paralyzed, made no resistance, and only muttered—

"Is this an illusion of magic, or art thou more than mortal?"

"What mean'st thou, brave Moor?" asked the wondering knight, while his men (who had closed up to prevent the emir's escape) looked on in silent amazement.

"When I left Grenada one moon ago, a Christian

B 763

"HE STARED AT HIS FOE'S REVEALED FACE"

slave was at our king's court whom he prized so highly, that he would not even let him go beyond the Alhambra's gates, lest he should escape; yet now standeth he before me in thy likeness—for, as truly as the sun shineth above us, thy face and form, yea, thy very voice, are his!"

CHAPTER XXVII

An Astounding Revelation

It was now El Zagal's turn to be amazed at the effect that his words produced on his foeman; for Alured grew pale as death, and swayed in his saddle as if stunned by a blow.

But instantly the wary Englishman was himself again, for the caution taught him by a two years' struggle with the endless wiles of Moslem war, warned him at once of the imprudence of betraying such emotion before an enemy. Rallying his wonderful self-command, he said with perfect steadiness—

"Marvel not, valiant emir, if thy words amaze me; for, in truth, a good knight of mine own land, who was as like to me as my image in a glass, hath long been accounted dead, and I myself deemed I had seen him slain with my own eyes. If he be yet alive, it is as great a marvel as ever minstrel's lay hath told."

This explanation was all the more satisfactory to the emir, that (as his next words showed) it agreed with his own opinion.

"As truly as the Prophet (may his name be exalted!) made the full moon pass through the sleeves of his mantle, it must be as thou sayest, O Christian. At Grenada all men say that this slave of whom I speak hath indeed been raised from the dead, and that no weapon hath power to harm him, even as they say of thee."

"Know'st thou," asked Alured, "the land of his birth, or the name he bore?"

But El Zagal shook his head, and frankly owned that he knew nothing of either.

"At some fitter season, then," said De Claremont, "I will gladly hear all thou canst tell me of him, for I would fain learn if he be in truth my ancient comrade: but now must we go hence with speed, lest we be assailed in turn. Lo! I give thee back thy good blade, which none can wield so well; and if thou wilt pledge thy word to be true prisoner till rescued or ransomed, thou shalt ride among us free and unfettered."

The Moor's handsome face brightened at a courtesy that he could well appreciate, the civilized Moslems of Spain having a chivalry of their own, wholly wanting to the savage and ignorant Turks who were then hewing their way into the Greek Empire of Constantinople. He at once gave the required pledge; and when they were clear of the perilous pass, and riding down the northern side of the range to the border fortress of Santa Fé (Holy Faith), then garrisoned by Alured and his men, the

emir told freely all he knew of the mysterious captive of Grenada.

He had been bought at Seville by one of the king's purveyors, some years before, from the crew of a Barbary corsair, who had taken him with a captured Christian ship, after a long and hard fight, which cost them half their number. In this combat the nameless captive had performed prodigies of valour, fighting so desperately that even when sorely wounded, and assailed by five or six at once, he held out for some time after the rest of his comrades. At last he was struck down, and, as every one thought, slain; but when the deck was cleared, he was found still alive, to the amazement of the pirates, who thenceforth treated him with the utmost care, not only on account of the high price such a slave would fetch, but from a superstitious awe of one over whom death seemed to have no power.

"When he came to Grenada," went on the emir, "he found favour with our king, who loveth strong and valiant men; and he named him 'El Katoom' (the strong), and would have had him take the faith of Islam, and be a captain of our host, as being a mighty man of valour. But the Christian said nay; and then was the king wroth, and laid before him the holy Koran and a sharp sword, and bade him choose between them. But the Christian said that he feared not death, and that the king might slay him if he would; but that it was ill done for a king to bid any man do what, in like case, he would

not do himself. Then the king marvelled and let him be, and to this day he dwells in the palace unharmed, and all men wonder at him."

"He is a brave man, be he who he may," said De Claremont, with sparkling eyes. "Said'st thou, noble emir, that he is not suffered to go forth even of the palace gates?"

"Even so; for a certain wise man read in the stars that it was the fate of one like this slave to do much ill to the servants of the Prophet. Howbeit, methinks that prophecy spake of thee rather than of him; for thou art made in the same likeness as himself, and truly thy sword hath been mighty against the hosts of the faithful."

Alured made no reply, and seemed lost in thought; and when they entered the fortress, the knight, after seeing the sentries relieved, the rescued captives cared for, and the emir lodged in a commodious upper room near his own, withdrew to think over, as calmly as he could, the astounding possibility of this mysterious slave being his lost brother Hugo, of whose blood he had till now believed himself guilty.

The more he thought of it, the more likely it seemed. Though he had seen Hugo fall, he had no proof of his death, having fled from the spot without looking behind him. And could there be two men in the world so exactly like himself, not only in face and form, but even in look and voice?

Nor was it hard to find an answer to the question

how Hugo—if Hugo it were—after being left for dead at Calais, could have reappeared alive in Seville. He well remembered—for every detail of that fatal day was indelibly stamped on his memory—the Black Prince's charge to him and his brother to watch the shore against a descent of the corsairs who infested the coast. Had some of these rovers landed and found a man in rich armour lying seemingly dead, their first thought would have been to strip him, and then, finding him still alive, to carry him off for ransom or sale as a slave. That the ship taken by the Barbary pirates was one of these corsairs, with Hugo on board, Alured had little doubt, for no peaceful trader could have so long resisted the superior numbers of the Africans, and the unknown Christian's heroic and long-sustained combat against such fearful odds was just what might be expected of his gallant brother. Lastly, the captive's strict confinement within the palace walls explained why Hugo—if it were he—had never sent word home that he was still alive.

Putting all this together, he felt sure that his wild guess was right, and his heart bounded with such a thrill of joy as had not pulsed through it for many a weary day.

"If this," cried he, "be indeed the blessing of which good Brother Michael spake as awaiting me here in the south, he said truly, for all I have were a cheap price to pay for the knowledge that I am free of my brother's blood, and may yet find him again!"

He lost no time in questioning the emir as to the personal habits and peculiarities of "El Katoom," and learned that he had the lofty bearing of a man of high birth, that he excelled in all exercises, especially riding, and that, when in deep thought, he was wont to twist his hair round the forefinger of his left hand.

De Claremont's heart leaped at the last words, for he well remembered this habit of his lost brother. There could be no more doubt; Hugo was alive, and not far away!

"This seems a true picture of my lost comrade," said he, as composedly as he could; "and whether it be he or no, it were a good deed to save so bold a warrior from captivity. Think'st thou, brave emir, thy king would set him free if I offer him thy freedom in exchange? I trow he hath in his host few like thee!"

El Zagal acknowledged the compliment with a stately bow, but his grave look showed that he doubted the success of the plan.

"Thy words are gracious as thy deeds, noble knight; but a servant of the Prophet cannot lie, and thou must hear the truth from me, though it be bitter as an unripe date. Our king might miss me, were I to return no more; but not for my ransom, nor for the best jewel in his crown, would he free yon slave, who is to work such ill to the hosts of the faithful."

"But if, as thou say'st, the prophecy spake not

of him, but of me, what boots it to hold him captive?"

"Most true. Yet it will not be easy to convince the king that it is so. But this will I do; I will write with mine hand a letter to the king, and tell him how the case standeth, and what terms thou dost ask for my ransom; and then let him do as Allah (God) shall guide him."

The letter was sent off to Grenada at once, but for several weary weeks the impatient Alured waited in vain for an answer.

Trying as it was, however, this interval was not wasted; for, both from a wish to lighten his gallant foe's captivity, and because the cultivated Moor was a pleasanter companion than his own rude spearmen, he improved his acquaintance with El Zagal till the two brave men, widely as they differed in all points, felt to each other as old friends rather than foes. Thus De Claremont gained a far better knowledge than before of the manners, customs, beliefs, and even superstitions of the Grenada Moors, which was hereafter to do him good service.

At last, as the two stood side by side on the walls one evening, watching the stormy sunset fade over the dark mountains, El Zagal said suddenly—

"Yonder comes a rider in the dress of my people, as one in haste!"

In fact, the solitary rider who had just come

dashing over the crest of a far-off ridge in the last glow of sunset, neared them so fast that the emir's keen eye was soon able to recognize the messenger he had sent to Grenada; and Alured, with undisguised impatience, hurried down to hear his all-important tidings.

But the reply, for which he had waited so long, crushed all his hopes at one blow; for the king sternly refused to give up "the slave El Katoom" on any terms whatever!

CHAPTER XXVIII

Plot and Counter-plot

By a superhuman effort, Alured repressed his bitter sorrow at this sudden overthrow of his hopes. But the keen-eyed emir could not fail to see that he was sorely grieved; and, eager to lighten the trouble of one who had shown him such kindness, he called in the envoy, and questioned him closely, in the hope of learning something that might make the case less desperate.

But the envoy had little to add to what the letter itself contained. He could only tell that the Moorish king had seemed much disturbed by the news of El Zagal's capture—had shown great emotion at the suggestion that the prophecy which he had hitherto applied to El Katoom might refer to the White Knight instead—and had then had a long conference with some of his wisest counsellors, after which he had sent off El Katoom, with a strong guard, to the hill-fort of Tormas, on the southern slope of the Sierra Morena.

At the last words, Alured passed his hand over

his eyes to hide the sudden gleam that lit them up; for this news had a meaning for him, of which neither the speaker nor even the shrewd emir had any idea.

That night, in his own chamber, the knight pondered this new and strange hope, and the plan that he had formed for his brother's liberation.

In fact, the whole situation was now completely altered. What all his skill and courage could never have achieved, his foes had unconsciously done for him; and Hugo, no longer immured in the guarded walls of the Alhambra, was less than thirty miles from where he stood!

Nor was it hard for one so versed in all the wiles of Saracen war to guess why the king had taken a step so strangely at variance with his former jealous care of his valued slave. This sudden change had followed too close on the discovery of the marvellous likeness of that slave to the dreaded White Knight, not to suggest to the wary Englishman the existence of a plot for the using of this likeness to entrap himself, the Moors' most redoubted foe!

Now came the question, how best to profit by this strange turn of fortune.

Most captains of that iron age would have gone straight to the idea of capturing the fort and Hugo himself by a sudden dash; but not so the wary Alured. He knew that Tormas was strong both by nature and art, well garrisoned, and

commanded by a veteran second only to El Zagal himself in border warfare. Stratagem, not force, was needed here; and he at once set himself to devise a counter-plot.

In this attempt, the very next day brought him aid from an unlooked-for quarter. A second Moorish courier arrived with the king's offer to exchange El Zagal for a brave Spanish knight named Don Alvar de Perez, who had been his prisoner for some time, being too poor to pay the high ransom demanded.

Here was a chance which Alured was not one to let slip. Don Alvar, of whose courage and sagacity he had often heard, and who had been long enough among the Moors to know them well, was the very helper he needed to countermine the king's subtle device. He at once agreed to the proposal, and then, to throw his enemies off their guard, spread a report that he was unable to undertake any military operations at present, confirming it by keeping his men carefully within the fortress. This he could do with a clear conscience, the Moors being so cowed by their recent defeat, the fall of so many of their best warriors, and El Zagal's capture, that they made not a single foray during the whole of that month.

This inaction was a sore trial to De Claremont's fierce and restless followers; but he himself felt it more keenly than any of them.

The shock of this sudden discovery that the remorse which had blasted his life was groundless, and the brother he thought he had slain still alive, and within reach, had shaken his strong nerves fairly off their balance; and he was ceaselessly tortured with nervous and almost childish fears, which (however ashamed of them) he tried in vain to throw off. Hugo would die ere they met—the Moors would drag him back to slavery—he himself would be struck down by war or sickness just as his plans were ripe—his foes would surprise the fortress entrusted to his care, and carry him off to the same bondage as his ill-fated brother.

Day after day, the troubled man paced the ramparts with the fierce unrest of a caged beast of prey, straining his eyes southward in the vain hope of seeing another Moorish courier appear over the dark hilltop. Night after night, he started from feverish dreams of struggling in the grasp of the victorious Moors, or, worse still, finding himself arrayed in turban and caftan, and ranked among the sworn foes of the Cross. El Zagal naturally supposed the terrible White Knight to be pining for fresh battles, and wondered what secret cause doomed him to this galling inaction; and Alured's rough soldiers, knowing nothing of the truth, began to mutter that he must be bewitched!

At last, just as he began to despair of any

further answer, and to fear some new and darker plot of his foes, he saw one evening a single Moor riding swiftly over the hills from the direction of his brother's prison at Tormas.

This man bore a letter to De Claremont from the commandant of Tormas, Ali Atar, who invited the "great Christian chief," with many florid Eastern compliments, to visit him there as an honoured guest, and settle the proposed exchange of prisoners, Don Alvar having just been sent from Grenada to Tormas to be exchanged for the emir.

This, coupled with what he already knew or guessed, seemed to Alured a polite invitation to come and be killed or made prisoner. But he was not to be so easily caught; nor did he take long to devise a plan for foiling his wily foes with their own weapons.

"Effendi (master), here is a Christian knight from Santa Fé, who would speak with thee."

"Is it the White Knight?" eagerly asked Ali Atar, who, though prostrated by severe illness, still directed from his sick-bed the movements of his wild followers.

"Not so, O my father; it is but one of his knights, with a letter that he is bidden to give into thine own hand. Thou knowest that when I bore thy message to the White Knight, I found him laid on his couch, and bowed down by sickness; and all his men were sorely out of heart."

The grim old sheikh muttered a curse under his breath; but, furious as he was at finding his plans thus foiled, the commandant of Tormas was far too good a general to lose a chance of seeing into those of his enemies.

"Admit the Christian dog; perchance we may learn somewhat from him."

In came a tall knight in black armour, with a dark plume in his helmet, the open visor of which showed the swarthy face and black hair of a Spaniard. He handed a sealed letter to Ali Atar, who, as he took it, little guessed that he had got his wish after all, and that this seeming Spaniard was the White Knight himself.

"Peace be with thee," said Alured, purposely making his Arabic so bad that a lurking grin flitted over the grave faces of the attendants.

"With thee be peace," replied the sheikh, as he opened the letter, and found the knight recommended to him as having full powers to negotiate the exchange of prisoners. Having read it, he addressed the envoy in Arabic; but the latter shook his head, and replied in Spanish.

But Ali Atar, a Moor of the old school, hated the "dogs of Spain" too utterly to have learned their tongue, and shook his head in turn.

"We shall need an interpreter," said he, "in conferring with this infidel who knows not our speech. Call hither quickly the unbeliever El Katoom!"

At the sound of his brother's Moorish name, Alured (though he had foreseen this order, and done his best to bring it about) felt his strong nerves tingle; and as the crimson curtain of the doorway fell back, the brave man's heart bounded as if it would burst from its place; for there before him stood—thinner and darker than of old, in Moorish dress, but still plainly recognizable—his lost brother Hugo.

CHAPTER XXIX

Treachery

ONLY for a moment did this weakness master the cool and resolute Englishman, whose self-command was instantly restored by the recollection that the least imprudence on his part, before these watchful and merciless foes, would be fatal both to himself and to him whom he came to save.

But how was he to reveal himself to his brother, without risking an outburst of emotion that would betray them both?

A moment's thought told him what to do; and with a well-feigned start of surprise, he cast a fierce look at Hugo, and, lifting his clenched hand, cried in English, in the tone of one hurling a threat at an enemy—

"Hugo de Claremont, do you know your brother Alured?"

That Hugo did so, was clear from the start of amazement, and the sudden paleness of his sun-browned face. But, mindful of the peril of betraying any emotion before these keen and suspicious watchers, he controlled himself with a mighty

effort, and, retorting Alured's stern look, said with equally well-assumed defiance—

"Thank God, my brother, that I see you once more!"

"What means this, El Katoom?" cried Ali Atar, who had watched this strange scene in silent wonder. "Wherefore eyest thou yon infidel so fiercely? and why did he threaten thee but now?"

"Valiant sheikh," replied Hugo, frowning like one enraged beyond all patience, "when I last met this man, we stood sword-point to sword-point: and I little thought to meet him here."

This, though literally true, imposed on the wily Saracen more completely than the most artful falsehood. If these two were mortal foes, and had last met in deadly fight, there could be no risk of collusion between them; and his suspicions vanished at once.

The sheikh now conveyed to Alured his views on the proposed exchange of prisoners, which Hugo translated sentence by sentence; but under cover of this game of question and answer, the brothers were able to exchange confidences unsuspected.

Alured told Hugo of his identity with the famous "White Knight," his position as commandant of Santa Fé, and his resolution to effect his brother's escape. Hugo, in turn, told briefly how, awaking from his swoon after the fatal combat, he found himself on a Spanish privateer,

which was taken soon after by a Barbary corsair. In the fight, he received a new wound that all but cost him his life; but the admiration of the Moors for his prowess saved him from the doom of his companions, and at the court of Grenada he had been kindly treated, though strictly guarded, till the Moorish king's plan of using him to entrap the dreaded White Knight caused his removal to Tormas.

At this point Ali Atar, having said his say, broke up the conference and dismissed his interpreter; and as Hugo turned to quit the hall, his brother had just time to warn him that any man who should say to him, "Beware of the White Knight!" was the chosen agent of his escape, and to be trusted accordingly.

But the wily sheikh, though no longer suspecting this Christian envoy, was far too wary to let him spend a whole night at large in the castle, and learn the strength of its defences and its garrison. As soon as Alured had partaken of some food, he was escorted out of the fort by the commandant's black guards (who were indeed such in a double sense) without being allowed even to see the Spanish prisoner for whose release he was treating; and Ali Atar chuckled grimly at his success in "outwitting the unbeliever," little dreaming how signally the unbeliever had just outwitted him.

A few days later, a small party of Moors from Tormas, and a detachment of equal number from

the garrison of Santa Fé, met midway between the two forts, and Don Alvar was formally exchanged for El Zagal—the invalided sheikh being represented by his second in command, and Alured by his veteran seneschal.

Hugo, however, was not with the Moorish party; for as Ali Atar's bodily powers weakened, his jealous vigilance grew keener than ever. True, the captive (though resolute neither to break his knightly vows, nor forswear his religion) had skilfully avoided any open gainsaying of the hints thrown out by his jailers as to the service expected of him, and allowed them to think that he would comply when the time came. But the crafty old Moor meant to be on the safe side, and kept the precious hostage all the more carefully in his sight, the weaker he grew.

To the free-born, high-spirited Hugo this constant sense of being watched and spied upon, and kept in like a chained dog, would have been galling at any time; for he was not only a prisoner but a slave—the slave of those "heathen dogs" whom every Christian of that age, alas! thought himself bound to hate and curse and slay, in place of trying to enlighten them and do them good. But now that he had learned that his brother was alive and near him, and the freedom of which he had begun to despair actually within reach, this degrading bondage became intolerable. Every hour seemed a day, every day a year, as he waited in vain for

the promised signal of deliverance; and, worse still, every day that went fruitlessly by brought the time nearer when the Moors would attempt their plan of using him to ensnare his own brother. At any moment he might have to choose between death and treason to his country and his God; and his own choice would doom him to die like a felon and a slave, in place of falling (as he had always hoped) fighting for some good and holy cause in the ranks of his Christian brethren. Bitterer than all was the thought of perishing just when help was at hand, and the last hour of his weary bondage about to strike.

Had this grinding torment lasted longer, the captive must have been crushed by it; but a change was at hand.

On the seventh day after the exchange of prisoners, as Hugo sat moodily by the sick sheikh (who would hardly let him out of his sight now), a soldier came to report the arrival of a deserter from Santa Fé.

"A deserter!" cried Ali Atar, regaining for a moment all his lost energy. "Bring him to me at once, that I may learn what these Spanish dogs be about."

Hugo's heart beat quicker, guessing that this pretended deserter was the promised agent of his escape. The curtain fell back, and the soldier ushered in a small, meagre, yellow-faced half-breed, ragged, dusty, and travel-stained.

"May thy prosperity increase, noble sheikh!" said the supposed renegade, prostrating himself with cringing Eastern servility. "Permit thy humblest slave to anoint his eyelids with the dust of thy threshold, his refuge from Christian dogs!"

"Art thou a true believer?" asked the sheikh, eyeing him as a lion might eye a monkey.

"Praise be to Allah, I am! There is but one God, and Mohammed is His Prophet."

"Thou wert a captive of the infidels, then?" said Ali Atar, looking at him with a new interest.

"The great sheikh hath said it. I was a slave in the castle of Don Alvar de Perez (may evil overtake him!), which, as your highness knows, lieth not far hence; and when the infidel was exchanged for the noble Emir El Zagal, I, Yakoob (Jacob), the son of Selim, and certain of his other slaves, were sent to Santa Fé to attend on him; and thence, by the blessing of Allah, I escaped hither."

"And what do the dogs of Spain? Methinks the White Knight is not one to keep his men long idle."

"He lieth sore sick, but he and De Perez (ill-luck attend them both!) take counsel daily how to harm the Faithful; and they speak much of this fort of Tormas, and of one El Katoom, who is therein."

"Hearest thou this, El Katoom?" said the sheikh to Hugo.

"What! is this he?" cried the half-breed, with well-feigned surprise. "I counsel him, then, to

beware of the White Knight, who meaneth him no good."

All Hugo's self-command could not repress a start at this long-expected signal word; but to Ali Atar such emotion seemed quite natural in a man thus marked for vengeance by the terrible White Knight.

"But why," asked he, "should he mean ill to El Katoom, who is a Christian like himself?"

"The infidel hath heard that El Katoom is minded to turn to the true faith, and ride in the ranks of the Prophet's servants (happy be the day that seeth him thus enlightened). Therefore are the Christian captains wroth, and have sent forth men to watch for him, vowing to put him to a cruel death if they take him."

This tale, though as gross a lie as even Yakoob had ever told, did its work admirably. It confirmed Ali Atar's belief that, when the time came, Hugo would be found compliant; it strengthened his trust in the man who had brought such news, and it told Hugo himself all he wished to know.

"Saidst thou not," cried the sheikh, with a sudden gleam of the old warrior-fire in his sunken eyes, "that these dogs have sent men to watch for El Katoom? If thou canst tell me where those men may be found, rich shall be thy reward."

"I will do more, mighty sheikh," said the renegade, whose rat-like eyes glittered greedily at the word 'reward.' "I will myself guide your

highness's warriors to the spot where, if I heard aright, the Spanish dogs are to lie in ambush."

Sure enough, at dawn next morning, Hugo, looking down from his lonely chamber in the highest tower, saw a band of Moors ride off toward Santa Fé, with Yakoob as their guide.

Somewhat to Hugo's surprise, he was not summoned to the commandant's presence as usual; and when he wished to leave his room, he found the door fastened outside!

What could this mean? Had his intended escape been betrayed? The thought was maddening, and never had the captive strained his eyes more longingly towards the distant hilltop that hid his brother's stronghold, beyond which lay outspread, in the brief, bright, winter sunshine, the dry, dusty plains and bare uplands of La Mancha, dotted with the quaint little hamlets and old-fashioned windmills known to Don Quixote two centuries later.

Presently a stir and bustle arose below, increasing as the day wore on; but what it meant he could not guess. It was late in the morning when a soldier brought him food; but the man looked sullen and gloomy, and, without a word of reply to his eager questions, went hastily out, and made fast the door.

Deeper and darker grew Hugo's secret fears, which suddenly received an unlooked-for and terrible confirmation; for from his lofty tower he

all at once caught a passing glimpse, far away among the wooded hills, of a small band of riders in Christian dress flying as if for their lives from the pursuit of the turbaned horsemen!

Hugo turned pale, and his heart grew heavy as lead. Was this, then, the rout of the detachment sent to aid his escape, and the ruin of his last hope?

But a moment's thought reassured him. So small a band was plainly unequal to coping with the superior numbers of the Moors, and might, after all, be only a scouting party, which would naturally fall back when menaced by such odds. Still, the sight did not tend to raise his drooping spirits, and he eagerly awaited an explanation.

But his second warder was as obstinately silent as the first, and his anxiety remained unallayed.

Afternoon was waning into evening, when he heard a tramp of hoofs and a clamour of voices, and looking down saw the Moorish band returning, plainly in high glee. From their loud and boastful replies to their comrades' eager queries, Hugo gathered that their guide had led them by various by-paths to a wooded hollow some miles away; that he had there made them halt, while he plunged into the thickets alone; that he suddenly came flying back, chased by several Spanish horsemen, who fell back at sight of the Moors; and the latter, charging in turn, broke right into the midst of a band of ambushed foes. In the ensuing skirmish,

several were wounded on either side, though none actually slain; but the Christians were put to flight, and the Moors brought home as trophies the cloaks and weapons let fall by the fugitives.

This affair—their first brush with the enemy since their fatal defeat at the Guarama Pass—highly elated the Moors, who held it as quite a victory; but Hugo himself thought otherwise.

He had heard enough of the defenders of Santa Fé to be sure that they were not the men to turn their backs on any Moorish force without good reason. What if this were but a feint of his brother to throw the Moors off their guard, and confirm their trust in the guide who had led them so successfully? What if that guide, while pretending to beat the thicket in quest of foes, had found a moment to make his report to Alured or one of his officers, and then come bursting forth as if pursued?

The more he thought of this, the more likely did it seem; and his heart was lighter when the door opened to admit his evening meal, brought by two men, one of whom was Yakoob the guide!

While pretending to arrange the table, Yakoob passed close to him and whispered—

"Be ready to-morrow at nightfall."

There was little sleep that night for Hugo de Claremont.

Next morning he was roused from a brief snatch of feverish slumber by a cry, or rather wail,

echoing through the whole castle; and springing to the window, he heard a Moor below call out to a comrade—

"Is it so in very deed, friend Ibrahim?" (Abraham).

"It is even so, brother Yoosoof (Joseph). To God we belong, and to Him must we return. Our father, Ali Atar, has gone home to the mercy of God!"

Hugo felt his bold heart stand still. Ali Atar dead! Who could tell what might come of it? But the results were to be such as even he could not have foreseen.

The dead sheikh's successor was a fiery young Moor, full of confidence in himself and scorn of his Spanish foes. The moment he heard from the untiring Yakoob (who had been out on the watch since dawn) that a Spanish band of raiders had been seen not far away, young Suleimaun, without a thought of the important fortress under his care, sallied out with all his best men to fall on "the infidel dogs."

Slowly the weary hours of that endless day crept by, and at nightfall rose to the captive's ear the hoarse challenge of a sentry at the gate to some one outside.

Hugo could not hear the reply, but the soldier rejoined at once—

"It is good; enter, friend."

The heavy gate swung slowly open, and the

torch lighted by the other sentry showed Hugo two men in Moorish dress riding into the court-yard, the foremost calling out as he entered—

"Good news, brother! our captain Suleimaun is victorious, and he and his men will be here ere long, with the heads of the Christian dogs on their spears."

Hugo's heart leaped, for though the speaker was dressed as a Moor, and spoke fluent Arabic, the voice was that of his brother! The hour of escape had come!

Even with the overwhelming joy of that moment, however, mingled a thrill of terror at the thought of what must happen, were the famous White Knight, the Moors' most dreaded foe, detected within their walls. But he had no time to think of it, for just then his door swung noiselessly back, and in the doorway stood a shadowy form, as if shaped from the gathering darkness.

"Come!" said a ghostly whisper; and Yakoob, taking him by the arm, led him cautiously forth.

"The doors below are locked and guarded, but I will bring thee out by a better way, and with this thou may'st climb up out of the ditch."

He thrust into Hugo's hand a long pole with an iron hook, used for taking down the lamps in the great hall. Hugo clutched it (with a passing thought that it might serve as a weapon), and followed his guide round the angle of the wall.

This inner wall was but twelve feet high, and

the ditch below, though deep, was narrow, and almost dry in places. Neither seemed formidable to the active Englishman, who was about to let himself drop, when Yakoob laid a restraining hand on his arm, and uttered a skilful imitation of the cry of a night-bird.

The cry was at once echoed below, and from behind a huge heap of dry forage glided two dim forms, whom Hugo (though he could barely see them) easily guessed to be Alured and his assistant.

Yakoob let down a silken cord, to which Alured made fast a heavy purse.

The rascal drew up his ill-got gains with greedy haste, and then produced a strong rope, which he knotted round a jutting pinnacle.

Hugo shot down it like an arrow, but hardly had he touched the earth, when Yakoob shouted from above, with all his might—

"Hither, hither, true believers! here is a Christian dog escaping!"

In fact, this double-dyed traitor, who really was a follower of Don Alvar, and had been well paid by him and Alured to aid Hugo's escape, had all along intended to earn a twofold reward by helping him up to a certain point and then betraying him.

Even Alured and his veteran helper were paralyzed for a moment by this new and fearful dilemma; but Hugo was as prompt as ever. Clutching his pole by the end, he darted it upward, and just

caught with his hook the traitor's skirt as it hung over the parapet. The sudden tug flung Yakoob headlong into the muddy ditch, and Hugo, in turn, shouted lustily—

"Help, brothers, or the infidel will escape!"

"Where is he?" cried several Moorish soldiers, rushing up.

"Yonder he lies," said Hugo, pointing to the half-seen form of the stunned Yakoob, now almost buried in the mud. "I cannot drag him forth unaided. Seize and hold him fast!"

"We will!" cried they; and, leaping into the ditch, they pounced upon the wrong man, and dragged him off, he being so smeared with mud as to defy recognition.

Just then Alured, now his own cool and daring self again, fired the pile of forage beside him, which, dry as tinder, at once sent up a broad jet of flame far into the air.

"Fire!" he roared, as the rising wind whirled a shower of fiery flakes against the towers above. "Help, brothers! The castle burns!"

The soldiers at the outer gate flew at once to quench the flames, and the three Englishmen, hidden by the smoke, darted to the now unguarded gate, and began to unbar it.

But just as they thought themselves already safe, one of the Moors happened to look round, and, seeing what they were about, came hastily back, saying—

"What do ye? No man opens these gates after dark, save at our captain's bidding."

One moment more and all would have been discovered; but just then a trampling of hoofs was heard outside, mingled with the Moslem war-cry, "Allah Ackbar!" (God is victorious), and the Moor, supposing that Suleimaun and his band had returned, opened the gate himself.

In poured a long line of riders in Moorish garb, whose white dresses, emerging from the gloom into the glare of the fire, gave them the look of rising ghosts. But hardly had they entered, when they flung off their disguise and appeared in Spanish armour, while a shout of "St. James for Spain!" made the air ring.

Alured's plan had succeeded beyond his hopes. Warned by the traitor Yakoob of Ali Atar's death and Suleimaun's intended sally, he and Don Alvar had fallen on the rash young leader unawares, cut off him and all his men, and entered Tormas in the clothes of the slain!

The garrison fought fiercely, but they had not a chance of success; and ere the moon rose, the Christians were masters of Tormas. Yakoob was paid for his villainy as he deserved, being murdered by the enraged Moors in mistake for their prisoner; and Hugo was free at last.

"Now I know that God has forgiven me," said Alured, solemnly, as he and his brother stood hand in hand on the captured fort at daybreak, with the

banner of Spain waving over them. "Canst thou forgive me too, Hugo?"

"I have nought to forgive, brother," cried Hugo, laying his hand lovingly on the other's shoulder. "Let all the past be as an ill dream, and let us thank God that He hath given us a chance to do some little good."

"And that we may lose no time in doing it," cried Alured, "let us now hie home to England; for it fits us not to forget, while upholding God's cause abroad, the true vassals whom He hath given into our care at home. Our noble master, the Black Prince, hath cared for our lands in our absence, and we shall doubtless find all in good order."

And early next day the long-parted twins set off homeward together.

CHAPTER XXX

A Village Festival

"Dickon, take that long body of thine out of the way, and let us pass! Think'st thou, Long-shanks, we have need of a Maypole in September?"

"Stint thy prate, Master Lack-beard. Think'st thou we need a new clapper to our church bell, that thou set'st thy twopenny clapper wagging so?"

"Ha, pretty Gillian! ever sweet and blooming as a rose!"

"As a tuft of marsh-grass, thou mean'st, Gaffer Thickset, else would not a fat goose admire me thus."

"How now, Hal? What, man, thou art gay as a courtier whose tailor hath given him long credit! With all these bright ribbons and gauds on thee, thou'lt dazzle our eyes!"

"If thine be dazzled, Gaffer Green, it is with looking at thine own foolish face in a duck-pond, or mayhap with a pot of strong ale drained at another man's cost."

These and other scraps of rough wit flew thick and fast amid the crowd gathered on the village green of the little hamlet of Deerham, which, as

usual, had grown up under the protection of the great feudal castle held by the lord of the manor himself.

A gay and goodly picture was that blithe crowd of merry-makers in the bright autumn sunshine—one of those pictures that half redeemed the gloom of that iron age, and made many who ought to have known better mistake the so-called "good old times" for an age of gold, instead of a riot of useless bloodshed, reckless waste, cruel oppression, brutal ignorance, and grinding misery.

In the centre of the green a dozen "morrice-dancers," with tiny bells hung to every part of their fantastic garb, were keeping up a constant jangling aptly compared by a local wag to the tongue of Dame Cicely Prate, a noted scold, who looked daggers at him in return. On the right, a juggler was swallowing ribbons by the yard, or breathing out fire and smoke, to the amazement of the gaping clowns who jostled around him. On the left, a strolling minstrel was singing the old comic ballad of "The Felon Sow," the success of which was shown by the loud laughter that greeted every verse, and the shower of copper coins that clinked ceaselessly into his well-worn green cap.

A little farther off, a quack was vaunting a new and potent medicine, as able to "cure all ills, from a smoky chimney to a scolding wife." Just beyond him, a pretended pilgrim was selling as relics from

the Holy Land some rusty nails and pot-sherds picked up at the next village, while a huge brown dancing-bear, led by a swarthy, gipsy-like man in a slouched hat, was performing some clumsy antics hard by, to the mingled delight and terror of the shock-headed village boys. In the background, a big fire was blazing, and preparations were being made to roast an ox whole, without which, in those days, no English merry-making could go off properly.

Every moment swelled the noise and bustle, as new arrivals joined the throng. Ruddy, stalwart farmers in holiday garb, on horses as broad and sturdy as themselves, with their buxom dames perched behind them; hard-faced, bare-armed workmen in leather jerkins, from the town of Winchester; rosy village lasses in short skirts and broad hats, be-ribboned in all the colours of the rainbow; threadbare students from Oxford and Cambridge, begging their way (according to the strange custom of the age) from one market-town to another; bare-footed friars in their long, dark robes; tanned, round-shouldered peasants in coarse woollen jackets or rough frocks of grey frieze, with the mud of the Hampshire lowlands clinging to their heavy, clouted shoes; and war-worn soldiers in dinted steel caps and frayed buff coats, just home from the French wars, watching the scene with an air of grand, indulgent contempt, like men who had already seen everything worth seeing.

All at once there was a cry that the lords of the castle were coming down to watch the sports, and this news broke up the most popular exhibition of the day—the rescue of Princess Sabra from the dragon by St. George, who, with an iron pan for a helmet, and a spit for a spear, made quite as queer a figure as the monster itself, while the princess, represented by a freckled, red-haired boy of twelve, did small justice to the praises of her beauty in old romances. But at the first glimpse of the two stately forms that came riding slowly down the steep, winding path from Claremont Castle, dragon, princess, and champion were alike forgotten, and all heads turned at once toward Sir Alured and his twin-brother Sir Hugo.

The ten years that had passed over those two handsome faces since that morning on the ramparts of conquered Tormas, had touched both very lightly; and they received with a frank, hearty smile the boisterous welcome of the crowd, which greeted them not only with shouts and throwing-up of caps, but also with a universal and evidently sincere brightening of faces, very pleasant to see.

In truth, the two brave men had well earned it. The lull in the age-long duel between France and England caused by the truce of 1358, and the treaty of Bretigny two years later, had enabled them to make good their vow of dwelling henceforth on their own lands, and caring for their long-neglected

tenantry, as they had done, and were still doing, with all their heart and soul.

"God bless 'em both!" cried a sturdy yeoman, warmly. "When my father lay a-dying, Sir Alured was at his bedside as soon as either priest or physician."

"And when my child was sick," added a woman's voice, "scarce could I tell the tale to Sir Hugo as he passed, when lo! away he flew to Winchester town as if riding for his life—ay, he went his own self—and brought back the most skilled leech in the town, who saved my little lass's life."

"And when yon great storm tore down our cottage, and left me and mine no place to lay our heads, who came first to our aid?—Why, who but our young lords themselves? They housed us in their own castle, no less; and they sent men to build up our dwelling again, better than before; and all at their own cost, lads! God bless them for it!"

"Amen! for whereas many knights and barons do but wring from their vassals what little they have, to maintain their own state, have not our lords given up all the wealth they won in the French wars, to keep us in peace and comfort? May God repay them a thousand-fold! Would Sir Simon Harcourt, had he lived, have done the like? I trow not! He would have stripped us as bare as a beech in December. Long life to the good lords of Claremont!"

Such speeches came ceaselessly to the ears of the twins, as they took their places on a raised seat at the end of the green; and their noble faces grew radiant with joy.

"Are we not well repaid, Alured, for all the storms and sorrows of former years?"

"That are we indeed, Hugo; and now we lack but one thing to complete our happiness—that our good friend Du Guesclin were here to share it."

"Right, brother. Truly I owe him much, for, but for him, we two had never met again."

"And I," said Alured, "owe him yet more—mine own life, and it may be mine own soul likewise. I would we had some tidings of the good knight; we have heard nought since yon wandering minstrel brought word, two years agone, how he was made prisoner at Auray by old John Chandos, and how, when it was noised abroad that he was taken, every old wife in Brittany spun a double portion daily, that she might in some sort aid to pay his ransom."

"God keep him, wherever he be. But see, the archery is about to begin."

It was, and the brothers had seldom seen better practice, even among the Moorish bowmen of Spain; for in those days every English yeoman was a crack shot, and had often to aim at other marks than a harmless target. More than one of those present had seen the glittering chivalry of

France fall like autumn leaves before their arrows on the fatal field of Crecy, and King John the Good led captive by English archers amid the heaped-up slain of Poitiers; and the best competitors were so evenly matched, that even the two practised warriors who adjudged the prize took some time to decide.

"May Old England's grey-goose shafts ever fly as strongly and truly!" said Alured, as he handed the prize to the winner.

"And may they be ever loosed by hands as deft and loyal!" added Hugo.

Next came the leaping, in which two local athletes ran each other so close that the match seemed a drawn one; but in the last trial, one of the two just touched the bar with his toes, and came down on his face with such a whack that Gaffer Green said with an unfeeling chuckle—

"He've took after his own pigs, he have; he be a-rooting up the earth with his nose!"

The winner was young Will Wade, who had been one of the loudest in praise of his young lords; and Will made so good a start for the foot-race (which came next) that he seemed likely to win that too. But just when close to the goal, he glanced aside a moment at the pretty face of his betrothed, Gillian Gray, who was watching him breathlessly; and in that moment his foot slipped, and down he came!

He was up again at once, but too late. The

next man had reached the goal, and poor Will was but second-best!

"Vex not thyself for that, lad," said Sir Hugo, kindly; "it was but an ill chance. Hadst thou been chasing the foes of our king and Old England, I warrant thy foot would have been steady enow; and thou hast shown how quickly a true Englishman can start up from a fall."

"On that matter your worships should be well able to judge," said the young athlete, bluntly, as he pouched the two gold pieces handed him by way of consolation, "being yourselves as true Englishmen as ever breathed!"

"Hear'st thou that, Hugo?" laughed Alured. "Times are changed, methinks, since our great-grandsire was wont to say, as the worst penalty he could invoke on his own head, 'May I become an Englishman!'"

In hurling the bar, the best man was the brawny village smith, who received the prize from Alured's own hand, with a kind word that he valued even more; and now but two "events" remained—the sword-and-buckler play, and the wrestling.

Just then the twins' keen eyes took note of two tall, sturdy men in half-armour, who had pushed their way forward with small ceremony into the front rank of the crowd.

Both wore the silver spurs of esquires, but their behaviour did not at all befit their rank; for they seemed bent on showing their contempt

for the sports and all connected with them as offensively as possible. At first they were content with scornful looks and muttered words of disdain; but when the sword-play commenced, the self-constituted critics began to utter their sneers aloud, so insolently that had not the lords of the manor been present, the sturdy villagers would soon have made these swaggerers change their tune.

"Did I not tell thee so, Gilbert?" cried the taller of the two. "This is what comes of rusting at home, and seeing nought of the world. Belike these yokels think they are very St. Georges; but we could teach them another tale."

"Thou art right, Humphrey. Cared we to cumber us with such gear, I trow we could give them a wholesome lesson, had the thick-skulled churls but the wit to profit by it!"

This was too much for young Will Wade, who, having just won the sword-and-buckler contest, turned short round, and said hotly—

"With your tongues ye are doughty champions, in truth; but if ye would try other weapons, come on!"

"And I," cried the stout smith (victor in the wrestling-match), "will gladly try a fall with these big talkers, and let 'em feel how a smith's vice can pinch!"

Gilbert, with a scornful laugh, threw off his upper garment, and closed with the smith; and

Humphrey, furnished with sword and buckler, faced Will Wade.

This time the village champions had met their match. Brave Will stood to it as stoutly as man could do, but he had no chance with one whose sword had been daily in his hand for years, and who added to this long practice the coolness learned in actual battle. The bout ended in his utter defeat; and at the same moment Ned Smith (who, with all his strength, was no match for his opponent's cool science) was sent sprawling by a dexterous back-trip.

"Now," cried Humphrey, boastfully, "I will stake the prize I have won, and five gold nobles to boot, if any man here will try a bout with me. Who takes my proffer?"

"With good St. George's aid, that do I!" said a calm voice behind him; and Sir Alured himself rose and stepped down into the ring.

The downcast faces all brightened at once, and a shout rent the air; for it was the firm belief of all Deerham village that there was no feat at which "the good lords of Claremont" were not a match for any man living; and the villagers were as confident of seeing these bullies humbled, as if both were conquered already.

Even the vaunting Humphrey felt a momentary chill, which (as usual with such base natures) he strove to cover with extra insolence.

"Gramercy for thy condescension, my good

lord," cried he, mockingly; "it is but too much honour for a poor esquire like me!"

"It is too much honour for thee!" said Alured, sternly, "not because thou art a poor esquire, but because thou art a malapert and ill-mannered cub. Look well to thyself, for thou hast deserved no mercy!"

Taking up the sword and buckler used by Wade (who flushed with pleasure at the implied compliment), the knight faced the esquire.

Humphrey was no mean swordsman; but he had to do with one who had overcome the flashing strokes of Moorish scimitars wielded by the best warriors of Grenada. Slash and hew as he might, he could find no opening: some of his blows were wasted on the air, and others parried with a force that made his arm tingle to the shoulder.

Thrice did he dash at his foe, and thrice was he driven back, foiled and panting; and at every repulse the cheers of the lookers-on grew louder and more joyous, till the hot-headed challenger lost his temper outright.

All at once Alured attacked in turn, enveloping the bewildered bully in a whirlwind of blows against which no guard could avail. Two crushing strokes beat down his buckler, and a wrench that seemed almost to twist his sword-arm out of joint sent his blade flying half across the ring, and he stood defenceless, while a roar of delight hailed his discomfiture.

"Holy father," said Alured, handing the gold he had won to a good priest in the crowd, "take this for thy poor; for, if gotten from an ill source, the more cause is there to apply it to good."

Just then Sir Hugo said quietly, "Enough, brother; it is now my turn. If this other gallant, who is so keen to instruct us poor ignorant country-folk, will graciously teach me to wrestle a fall, I am ready."

The general laugh that greeted this well-merited sarcasm swept away what little patience Gilbert had. His comrade's defeat had somewhat startled him; but, at sight of the challenger's slender frame, his native insolence revived.

"Loth were I," he sneered, "to soil your worship's gay clothes with dust."

"If thou canst so soil them, I give thee full leave," retorted Hugo, with a cutting emphasis that drew a fresh laugh from the admiring crowd.

Without a word more on either side the two men grappled.

Gilbert was a strong and skilful wrestler; but he was no match for one who had overthrown the best wrestler in Morocco. Slight as he seemed beside the bulky esquire, Hugo's sinews had been toughened by a thousand struggles and hardships, and his skill had never met its match.

In vain did Gilbert try every trip and fall he knew; in vain did he compress the light form in his strong arms, as if to crush it by main force; in

vain did he swing Hugo off his feet again and again, and put forth his full strength to dash him to the earth. Do what he would, the knight stood firm as ever; and at last Gilbert paused, fairly spent with his own exertions.

Then the scores of watching eyes saw Hugo's arms tighten suddenly, and his foe's huge broad back bend slowly in. So quietly was it done, that few guessed what strength was put forth to do it; but all at once (no one could see how) the big man's feet flew from under him, and down he went on his back with stunning force.

Then broke forth a cheer that shook the air; for, apart from John Bull's natural pleasure at seeing a bully "taken down," the chivalrous frankness with which the twin nobles had waived the privileges of their rank to meet such formidable foes was what the roughest peasant could appreciate.

The crestfallen boasters were glad to slink away, not without fears of further rough handling; and, in fact, had either of the Claremont brothers but held up his finger, the crowd would have broken the heads of both swaggerers on the spot, or even (for men did not stick at trifles in those days) pitched them neck-and-crop into the river. But sorrow and suffering had taught the two brave men a lesson of mercy, and the bullies were allowed to sneak off unharmed.

Hardly were they gone, when a trumpet-blast

awoke all the echoes of the hills, and a single rider, in the rich livery of the king's household, came dashing up to the spot, and, putting into Alured's hand a big, important-looking letter, encircled with a silk thread and sealed with the royal seal, clattered away as quickly as he had come.

"Brother," said Alured, "my mind misgives me that this means war, of which we have had enow already. God's will be done!"

He guessed but too truly. It was a summons from "Edward, by the grace of God Prince of Wales and Aquitaine, to his trusty and well-beloved liegemen, Sir Alured and Sir Hugo de Claremont," to meet him at Bordeaux before Christmas with as many men as they could muster, to join the army he was leading into Spain, to restore to the dethroned king, Pedro of Castile, the crown wrested from him by his half-brother, Henry of Transtamare.

To such a summons there could be but one answer; and, in as few days as sufficed to muster and equip their followers, the twin nobles, with heavy hearts at the thought of how few of the brave fellows around them would ever see their homes again, were on their way to the most shameful and disastrous victory won by England during the whole of the Hundred Years' War.

CHAPTER XXXI

A Strange Meeting

RARELY has the world beheld, even in that age of ceaseless surprises, so strange a spectacle as the English invasion of Spain in 1367. The bravest and most honourable man alive championing the falsest and most cruel; free Englishmen fighting to bring a gallant nation in bondage to a tyrant; a handful of heroes cutting their way into an unknown land, and braving pestilence, famine, and the attacks of an army thrice as strong as their own, in a quarrel with which they had nothing to do, and for a faithless despot who was all the while overreaching and betraying them—such were the startling contradictions produced by the resolve of a man like the Black Prince to aid a man like Pedro the Cruel.

But no such thoughts troubled the stout English who followed the prince through the Pyrenees in that memorable February; for, in a whole generation of constant war they had acquired, alas! such a love of it that (as the Wars of the Roses were to prove to the horror of all Europe a century

later) when no foes were to be found, they would fight each other rather than not fight at all. If no "good wars" were to be had in France, even an invasion of Spain was better than nothing; and in after days the few survivors of that ill-fated expedition bitterly recalled with what boyish, unthinking gaiety they had set out on it.

"Marry, this be a brave sight!" cried Will Wade, in whose untravelled eyes these glittering snow-peaks were a thing to be remembered for ever. "How bonnily yon snow glistens; for all the world like sugar on a Christmas cake! This is better sport than hammering horseshoes at Deerham—hey, Ned Smith?"

"Yon jackanape whom our lord overcame at sword-play," replied the smith, "spake truth for once when he said that a man who hath not seen the world is nought. Mark me, Will, when we go home to merry Hampshire when this job is done, we shall have tales to tell that shall make the Romaunt of Sir Bevis look pale as a half-heated iron."

"Hark ye, comrade Laneham!" cried Wade to an older man, "thou hast been in foreign parts before. Know'st thou the name of this valley?"

"Marry, that do I; it is called the Pass of Roncesvalles."

"Roncesvalles?" echoed Will. "What, the place where the good knight Messire Roland, the chief of King Charles's twelve Paladins, was slain

by the Saracens? Well, now, to think that I myself should tread the very ground where he died! I heard a minstrel sing the tale in our lord's hall one Christmas Eve, and I shame me not to own that I let fall a tear or two when he came to the good knight's death; but that I should one day see the very spot with mine own eyes, this could I never have dreamed!"

"I marvel not the good knight came by the worse, if the heathen dogs beset him in a place like this!" cried Ned Smith, eyeing wonderingly the shaggy woods and frowning precipices around him. "But tell me, Robin Laneham, what is yon thing perched on that high rock before us? A man, a mountain-goat, or a demon?"

"Belike he hath a spice of all three," chuckled the old archer; "he is a Spanish goat-herd."

"What?" cried Wade, staring at the strange, Robinson-Crusoe form. "Have the Spaniards that we go to fight, then, skins like to those of goats?"

"Wonderest thou at that? Why, what more natural than that these mountain-folk, who live among goats day and night, and eat nought but goats' flesh, and drink goats' milk, should come to have a goatish aspect themselves? I warrant that ere we come this way again, yon fellow will have not only a goat's skin, but goat's horns to boot!"

Honest Ned (to whom such a thing seemed quite possible) accepted the tale in perfect good

faith, and pictured to himself the amazement of his cronies at home, when he should tell them all this on his return.

"But how say men that this is a land of sunshine?" cried another recruit, wincing as a gust of icy wind smote him full in the face. "If it be so, the sun must be frozen like all else here, for the icicles hang on my beard as thick as ever they hung on the eaves of our cottage at Deerham!"

"Patience, lad; thou'lt have sun enow ere long, never fear."

In fact, they had only marched a few miles farther, when they suddenly emerged from the gloomy gorge, and saw below them, in the full glory of the midday sun, a wide sweep of green upland sloping down to a vast, smooth plain, dappled with clustering olive-trees, dainty gardens, dark orange-groves, pleasant orchards, quaint little red-tiled hamlets, and white-walled country houses embowered in noble trees, while, far beyond all, rose the stately ramparts and graceful towers of queenly Pampeluna.

A ringing shout of joy broke from the English host; and the weary men, forgetting all their fatigues, pressed on as briskly as ever.

But this land of promise proved far other than they thought. As far as Pampeluna, indeed, the weather was fine; and the warm, dry plain seemed a paradise to men benumbed with the cold mountain winds. But as soon as they left the town

behind, a storm of wind and rain burst upon them which lasted several days, completely breaking up the roads (which were bad enough at best), and sorely impeding their advance. Worse still, the country-folk had fled before the invaders, carrying with them all their stores; and the English, already short of supplies, were now menaced with actual famine!

At this sudden and dismal change, they began to murmur aloud.

"Is this the land of plenty whereof they told us? Why, there is neither bite nor sup to be had without fighting for it!"

"Plenty, quotha? Rare plenty, in sooth, when I myself saw, this very day, a loaf of bread (and a small one to boot) sold in our camp for a silver florin!"

"And see how these storms beset us, even in this land of sunshine! One would think, lads, there is a curse on our undertaking!"

"Small wonder if there be, when we fight for one like yon Spanish butcher, whom our Prince is so fond to brother! I saw him yester-eve, when he rode through the camp with his highness; and I tell ye his is a face that none would trust—no, not a five-year-old child! Dost mind, Hal, yon French dog that was chained in the courtyard of our inn at Bordeaux, which looked so mild and meek when any man came nigh to it, till, snap! it had him by the leg or ever he was

aware? Even such is Pedro the Cruel, as men call him—a goodly name, in truth, for a crowned king!"

"Crowned king, quotha? Could I have my way, I'd crown him with a red-hot trivet, as was done to yon French rogue who headed the peasant churls against the nobles in the days of the Jacquerie! He deserves no less, I trow; for what manner of king is he, think ye, at the very sound of whose coming his subjects fly as from the Evil One himself?"

When they crossed the Ebro at Logrono, the rain was still falling in torrents; and the soldiers' growls were louder than ever as they struggled through ankle-deep mud, wet, weary, half-starved, with the furious wind buffeting them like a living foe, and the stinging rain-gusts lashing their faces.

But all murmurs were hushed as there came striding through their ranks (on foot like themselves) a figure which all knew at a glance. It was a tall man in full armour, whose gaunt, strongly marked features, hooked nose, and quick, fierce, restless movements, with the piercing glance of his one eye, were grimly suggestive of an eagle about to swoop on its prey. Such was the famous Sir John Chandos, the best knight of Edward's host, and rightly called "the flower of English chivalry."

"How now, lads?" cried he, cheerily; "do ye flag with the goal in sight? Patience a little, and

ye shall have full amends. Yon Spanish knaves are so malapert as to deem that the bold lads of Merry England can be daunted by a gust of wind and a shower of rain; but we will teach them ere long that they have erred—ha?"

The great leader's stirring words put new life into all who heard; and forward pressed the toil-worn host as if it had just started.

On the morrow, their eagerness for action was increased tenfold by the news that Don Tello, Henry of Transtamare's brother, had fallen with a large force on an isolated English detachment, and cut off Sir William Felton, several other knights, and more than two hundred men. But, though burning to avenge this disaster, the English saw no way of doing so; for they found the Spanish army so strongly posted at the little town of Navaretta, that even the Black Prince durst not attack, in such a position, a force thrice his own; and all that day the opposing hosts faced each other in sullen inaction.

That evening was the most anxious that the great English leader had ever spent. Fight he must on the morrow, for not a morsel of food was left; and he would have to attack, with barely thirty thousand men, more than one hundred thousand. At Crecy and Poitiers his strong position had won the day against superior numbers, but now all the advantages of numbers and position were with the enemy.

The sun was sinking when his watchful eye saw a small group of horsemen advance a little before the glittering wall of spears and helmets in the Spanish host. They seemed officers of high rank, if not the actual commanders—and, in fact, the tall, handsome man in the centre, with a crown on his helmet, was Henry of Transtamare himself; and the short, square man in black armour, who was speaking to him so earnestly, was Bertrand du Guesclin!

The Breton hero's advice, if taken, would have sealed the doom of the English, and ended the war ere it had well begun. Warning Henry that his raw levies, though brave, were no match in open field for Edward's veterans, he pointed out that the unprovided English must either starve or fight at a disadvantage, and that all he had to do was to keep any supplies from reaching the enemy, and let famine and disease do the work for him.

But here, as at Auray, the great general's wise counsel was overborne by the folly of his hot-headed colleagues. The fiery Henry would hear of nothing but instant battle, and his brother Don Tello, flushed with his slight success, vehemently supported him, saying with a sneer—

"Sir Bertrand has not forgotten, belike, how these English made him prisoner at Auray; perchance he is afraid of the like ill-hap befalling again."

"On the morrow," said Du Guesclin, with a

look that made even the haughty Spaniard quail, "it shall be seen which of us two is the more afraid."

When a deserter brought word to the English, an hour later, that the Spaniards meant to come forth and meet them in the field next morning, the shout of stern joy that rolled like thunder from rank to rank startled even their over-confident foes, for then, as in after days, "it was ever the wont of the English to rejoice greatly when they beheld the enemy."

On the morrow the two hosts joined battle, and Bertrand's words were amply fulfilled. When Chandos's column of levelled lances and charging steeds came crashing into Don Tello's division, the boaster's heart died within him, and he fled with two thousand of his men, leaving bare the flank of the Spanish centre, on which the Black Prince himself instantly fell like a thunderbolt. And beside him, with a savage glare in his pale-blue eyes, his red beard bristling like a lion's mane, and his sword reeking with slaughter, rode Pedro the Cruel, athirst for his brother's blood.

But here the fight went hard, for Henry himself led the centre, and around him fought his bravest followers. The untrained Spanish levies fell like mown grass before men whose whole life had been one long battle; but new thousands succeeded, and the harvest of death went on, while Henry, striking right and left with the force of a giant, made his mighty voice heard above all the din—

"Brave gentlemen, you have made me your king; stand by me now as loyal men and true!"

Nobly did the doomed men redeem their fatal pledge, fighting on even when the battle was lost beyond recovery, to protect their king's escape. Nor was the heroic self-sacrifice vain; for, just as the last of the gallant band went down, Henry dashed through the ford of the Najarra unpursued, to renew the struggle a few months later, with better fortune.

He might not have got off so well but for a false report of his having made for Navaretta, which drew away most of the English soldiers, who, fired with the hope of a king's ransom, followed the chase so hotly that they burst pell-mell into the town with the flying Spaniards. The pursuers made at once for Henry's quarters, where, though they did not find him, they found a rich camp-equipage and service of gold plate, that made every face radiant.

"Here is a bit of glass that sparkles bravely!" cried Wade, pouncing on a diamond worth thousands of pounds—"and set in gold, too! Mayhap 'tis worth a crown or so; and anyhow it will be a gay gaud for my Gillian to wear o' holidays."

"This cup for my money!" shouted Ned Smith, seizing a beautifully carved goblet set with jewels. "Marry, how my gossips in merry Hampshire will stare when I show 'em a cup that was used by the King of Castile!"

"I will be content with this," said old Laneham, clutching a massive gold dish. "I had hoped to put a king or two to ransom ere this job was over; but half a loaf is aye better than no bread."

Meanwhile the Claremont twins, swept toward the river by the rush of flight and pursuit, heard all at once a well-known war-cry amid a whirl of struggling figures and clashing weapons, and, flying to the spot, they found three or four French knights fighting desperately, back to back, against a throng of English and Gascon soldiers. Foremost was a short, sturdy form in black armour, wielding a mighty axe, which dealt death at every blow.

"Slay him! Cut him down!" roared a big Gascon, springing back just in time from the fatal weapon.

"Nay! Take him alive for ransom!" shouted an Englishman. "He must be a knight of renown."

"Yield, noble Du Guesclin!" cried Alured, bursting through the press. "We have won the day, and thou canst do no more!"

But his kindly words were lost in the hideous din, and Bertrand, seeing him come rushing on, mistook him for a new foe. The fatal axe flashed and fell once more, and down went Alured beneath the blow of his old friend.

But as the falling-off of the broken helmet showed Bertrand whom he had smitten, the sight seemed to wither his strength, and he let fall his

terrible axe, while his foes, seeing him disarmed, closed fiercely round him.

"Back, fellows!" cried Hugo, sternly, as he thrust himself between. "Yield, good Sir Bertrand—yield to Hugo de Claremont."

"I yield me, rescue or no rescue, sith better may not be," said Bertrand, hoarsely. "But thy brother—lives he yet? If I have slain him, I shall ne'er have the heart to wield weapon more."

"Vex not thyself, fair sir," said Alured, faintly, as he tried to raise his bruised and aching head. "I am but somewhat dazed. Marry, thy blows are not such as a man can jest with."

"Now, God be praised my stroke slew thee not," cried Du Guesclin, raising him from the earth. "I ever thought we should meet again, but I deemed not it should be thus."

But neither the admiration of the whole army, nor the praise of grim old Chandos himself, nor the thanks and rewards heaped on them by the Black Prince (who welcomed their prisoner as if Du Guesclin had been his best friend instead of his most redoubtable foe), could chase from the brows of the twins the gloomy foreboding that clouded them; and, as they entered their tent that night, Alured said sadly—

"My mind misgives me, brother, that God is not with us in this work, and that it will not prosper."

He spoke but too truly. History has told how

their gallant host melted beneath the blighting breath of pestilence and famine—how its great leader saw his men perish round him while waiting in vain for the fulfilment of the promises that his faithless ally had never meant to keep—how he was forced to drain his own coffers to feed the men whom the crowned ruffian who owed his throne to them had left to starve and die—and how he finally repassed the Pyrenees with the wreck of his splendid army, heavy and sick at heart, bearing with him the seeds of the fell disease that was to doom him, only a few years later, to an untimely grave, while the royal cut-throat whom he had championed, within a twelvemonth of his restoration, lost crown and life.

CHAPTER XXXII

News of an Old Friend

YEARS rolled by, and brought many startling changes.

The Black Prince slept his last sleep in a stately tomb beneath the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral. His terrible father, Edward III., had followed him to the grave, leaving all his mighty schemes of conquest to come to nought. Sir John Chandos had died in battle, as he had always hoped to do; and many another great captain was missing from the ranks of English chivalry. Meanwhile Archbishop William de Wykeham, best and kindliest of scholars and Churchmen, was leaving a more enduring monument than all their blood-won honours, by planting at Winchester the germ of one of England's noblest schools.

The English crown had passed to the weak and worthless Richard II., in whose early years the whole land was shaken by the terrible convulsion of "Wat Tyler's Rising." Of this despairing effort of the downtrodden people to obtain the right to be treated as human beings, the greatest historian of

the age coolly wrote: "There happened in England great commotion among the lower ranks of the people, by which England was near ruined without resource, and all through the too great comfort of the commonalty"! What that "too great comfort" was any man who can bear to read "The Vision of Piers Plowman" (written by one who had himself seen all the horrors he described) may judge for himself.

Meanwhile Du Guesclin had found his right place at last. The poor Breton knight who had been the scoff of his own kindred now held the sword of "Constable" (commander-in-chief) of all the armies of France, and was the chosen friend and adviser of a king worthy of him, Charles the Wise.

But only the faint echoes of these great events reached Alured and Hugo de Claremont in their quiet Hampshire home, where they were busied with the welfare of their vassals instead of seeking renown for themselves. Every day the brothers held open court in their hall, and any of their tenants who had a complaint to make, however slight, was sure of a patient hearing and a just award, in the true spirit of the grand old text carved over the door by which the suppliants entered—

"He shall deliver the needy when he crieth, the poor also, and him that hath no helper."

In fact, the bitter suffering they had themselves

endured had taught the two brave men to feel for others, and all their vassals had learned to look up to them, not with awe, but with trustful affection. Was there a family in distress, their eyes turned at once to the castle. Did two neighbours have a dispute which they could not settle, their first thought was to appeal to the decision of their lords. Did strife arise between two hot-headed lads, Alured or Hugo was sure to hear of it, and to blow it away with some hearty jest that set both quarrellers laughing at their own folly. Was a school to be founded, a church built, a poverty-stricken hamlet relieved, a house of refuge established for worn-out labourers or disabled soldiers, who so forward as the "good lords of Claremont"?

So year after year glided by, and the slim youths were now two stately men of middle age.

It was the morning of Christmas Day, 1379, and the lords of Claremont, having attended prayers as usual in the quiet old village church (the chancel of which held the sculptured tombs of their father and his ancestors), were feasting in their castle-hall on boar's head, venison pasty, roast goose, and other dainties of the season, a goodly portion of which had been sent to every house in the village.

The mirth was at its height, when a trumpet-blast rang from the outer gate, and a serving-man came to report that a knight of Brittany craved lodging for himself and his train, whose name was Sir Olivier de Clisson.

"De Clisson!" echoed Hugo. "Hearest thou, Alured? He was our comrade in many a fray ere he turned to the French party on some displeasure done him by old John of Chandos."

"Ay, truly; and mayhap he can give us tidings of Du Guesclin, for they be countrymen and friends. Admit him forthwith; he is right welcome."

A heavy step came clanging up the stair, and in the doorway stood the towering form of the best knight in Brittany after Du Guesclin himself.

His iron face bore no sign of age, though years had passed since they last beheld it, but a few scars were added to those that had seamed it before, and its grimness was deepened by the empty socket of the eye that he had lost at Auray, when still fighting in the ranks of England.

His change to the French side, however, made no difference in the welcome given him by his old friends; for in that age the knights of Brittany, Guienne, and Gascony changed sides so often that neither they nor those whose side they deserted thought anything about it.

"Welcome, brave De Clisson!" cried Alured, coming forward with extended hands. "What happy chance brings thee just in time to share our Christmas cheer?"

"I had an errand to your king from my liege lord the King of France" (the famous Breton seemed quite to forget how lately he had been

fighting against his "liege lord" with all his might), "and, being once over the narrow seas, I was loth to repass them without visiting what few of my old brothers-in-arms war and time have left me in this land."

"Be assured, not one of them is more pleased at thy coming than we, good Sir Olivier," said Hugo, heartily. "Our seneschal shall marshal thee forthwith to thy chamber, and the feast shall wait thy coming again."

De Clisson did not make it wait long, being hungry after his ride, and, in any case, the rough soldier was not one to waste much time in personal adornment. He was soon seated at the board, and in a full tide of gossip on the stirring events he had lately witnessed, in which Du Guesclin's name came up again and again.

No one, in fact, could better speak on this point than he, having borne a leading part in the marvellous victories by which Bertrand, as Constable of France, had won back from the English the provinces of Saintonge and Poitou, and most of Brittany as well; and Clisson had fought side by side with his great countryman as stoutly as he had fought against him a few years before.

"Our Bertrand's name is now on the lips of every man in France," said he with a heartiness which showed that envy, at least, was not among his many vices; "and the minstrels have made a romaunt concerning him and his lady, which men

call 'Beauty and the Beast,' that tells how a fair damsel consented to wed a monster that dwelt all alone in an enchanted castle, and thereby she brake the spell that bound him, and he was changed to as goodly a prince as lady's eye could rest on. Marry, 'twere beyond the power of magic," added he, with a hoarse laugh, "to do as much for our Bertrand!"

"Might such a thing be, the Lady Tiphaine were the very dame to do it," cried Alured. "I trust the noble lady lives and thrives?"

"Alas, no!" said Clisson, with a passing cloud on his rugged face. "She died some years agone, and it well-nigh brake Bertrand's heart; but men say that at the last she foretold to him that he should follow her ere long, and that comforted him somewhat."

Once launched on this favourite topic, Olivier poured forth all his enthusiasm for his chosen hero.

"It seems but yester-eve that our Bertrand was in prison at Bordeaux after the fight of Navaretta; and when there was question of his ransom, the Black Prince sent me and Sir Eustace d'Ambreticourt to bring Bertrand to his presence, for to speak with him thereon. And when we came to the prison, lo! there sat Bertrand amid the gaoler's children, with a chubby boy on each knee, and on his shoulder a little lass of three years old, plucking at his black beard with a hand no bigger than an oak-leaf, and chirruping to him like any bird!

Then laughed Sir Eustace (he was ever a merry man) and thus he spake: 'So help me St. Michael, men call Sir Bertrand the terror of the English, but methinks here be some English who fear him not a whit!'"

"It was ever his wont," said Alured, "to be debonair to children and ladies, though no man may abide his stroke. Men say that when he was ransomed yon time thou speak'st of, he got back to his home like a beggar, having given all he had to certain poor folk that he met wandering on the highway in distress."

"And they say truth; our Bertrand had ever an open hand and kind heart, and therefore is he loved of the poor. Marry, 'twas a sight to see how all Paris was moved when he rode into it on the day when the king made him Constable of France!"

"Thou sawest it thyself, then?" cried both brothers at once.

"That did I, and I would not have missed the sight for a thousand crowns. Into the town rode Bertrand, plainly habited as a simple burgher, with but one follower at his back. But, even in such guise, the people knew him—in truth, his face is not to be lightly forgotten—and out into the streets they swarmed by hundreds and by thousands, shouting till the air rang, 'Long live our Bertrand! To Bertrand the Constable's sword! None else is so worthy of it!'"

"There they spake but truth," said Alured, with sparkling eyes.

"But not so thought Bertrand himself; for on the morrow, when the king proffered him the Constable's sword before the whole court, he drew back abashed, and said, 'Dear lord and noble king, it fits me not to gainsay your pleasure; but this is too much honour for a poor knight like me, since there be many in your realm far more worthy of it. Moreover, in the hosts of France fight many of your kin, yea, and your own brothers. How should I, a simple Breton knight, lay my commands on them as on my soldiers? I pray you, my good lord, give so great a charge to some better man.'

"Then the king's face lighted up so as 'twas a pleasure to see; and he said right heartily, 'Thou art as modest as valiant, Sir Bertrand, but in this matter I may not yield to thee. Better man could I find none, were I to search all Christendom; and as for these my brothers and kinsmen of whom thou speak'st, let any man of them dare to dispute thy commands, and I will so deal with him that he shall never offend in such wise again. Take thine office, then, and defend this realm as God hath sent thee to do.' Thus was Bertrand in some sort enforced to take the office, whether he would or no; and small need have I to tell ye if he hath shown himself worthy of it."

"I have ever heard," said Hugo, "that he is in

high favour with the king; and it speaketh well for King Charles that he can so bestow his favour."

"Nathless there have been rubs between them," said Olivier, with a broad grin. "I was myself in presence, when, but a few months later, Bertrand spake to him, before all his court, such words as a king's ears have seldom heard."

"Ay, how chanced that?"

"Marry, thus. When winter came, and the war was stayed a while, certain ill counsellors persuaded King Charles (who was too wise to have done such folly himself) that it behoved him to hold fast what money he had, and give nothing out; so, when Bertrand sent to ask the pay due to his soldiers, he gat no answer but this, that it was not convenient to send it at that time.

"Men say who saw it, that his face was like a flaming fire; and he rent the letter in pieces, and stamped on them; and then he shouted for his horse, and away he flew to Paris, and burst into the king's presence as if entering a stormed castle. When the king saw him come he changed countenance somewhat, and went hastily to meet him, saying smoothly, 'Welcome, my trusty Sir Bertrand; thou knowest how highly I prize thee.'

"'Thou say'st it, lord king, but I see not the proof thereof,' quoth Bertrand, grimly. 'Where is the pay promised to my soldiers, who have fought thy battles all this year?'

"Then the king cast down his eyes; for

Bertrand's look was such as no man would have cared to meet—no, not I myself.

"'Be not moved, I pray, good Bertrand; thou knowest my coffers are well-nigh drained, and I cannot fill them again without laying heavy taxes on my people, which I am loth to do; but if thou wilt have patience——'

"'Patience?' cried Bertrand, in a voice like the thunder of heaven. 'What patience, when the men who have fought by my side are hungry and cold, and look in vain to me for their due? If they cannot be paid without laying on of taxes, lay them not on thy poor people, but on thy fat abbots and sleek bishops, and these soft courtiers who flaunt in silk and velvet while the men who defend them go starving and in rags! Paid shall my men be from the rents of mine own lands and castles, since their king grudgeth them what he oweth; and, for my office, let him take it who will, for I will bear it no longer!'

"And he flung his sword of state at the king's feet, with a clang that made all men start."

"Well done, well done!" cried Alured, clapping his hands in glee.

"And what said the king?" asked Hugo, who had listened with equal delight.

"What he said I know not, for he went hastily forth of the chamber; this I know, that Bertrand's men were paid to the last franc ere the month ended, and that he beareth the Constable's sword still."

"And how fares he now?" asked Alured, eagerly.

"Ill enow," said Clisson, shaking his head. "This past year he was taken with a sore sickness, which left him exceeding weak; and the physicians say that if he take not the better care, he must ere long give up his office to another."

The brothers exchanged a meaning glance.

"Thou art right, Hugo," said Alured, answering his brother's look as if he had spoken; "we must see him once more."

And the end of that winter found them crossing the sea to do so.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The Last Sunset

It was the fourth of July, 1380, and the sun was shining bright and warm on the craggy hills, and dark thickets, and quaint little hamlets of Western Auvergne, when four horseman (two of whom wore the gold spurs of knights) came at a brisk pace to a point where three roads met, and paused as if in doubt which to take.

"Methinks we cannot be far from the place now, brother Hugo," said Alured de Claremont; "but how shall we tell which of these roads leads to it? I see no one of whom to ask our way."

"Stay!" cried Hugo, rising in his stirrups, "meseems I spy a man at work in yon trench. What ho! good fellow! which of these ways leadeth to Chateau-Neuf de Randon?"

"Fair sirs," said the peasant, coming up to them and bowing low, "the midmost road is your way, and ye have scarce three leagues to ride; but know ye not that the town is sieged by the armies of France, and that none may enter?"

"We go not to the town, but to the camp," said

Hugo; "men say we shall there find our old and tried friend, Messire Bertrand du Guesclin."

"Be ye friends of Messire Bertrand?" cried the man, with a sudden glow on his hard face; "nay, then, may God bless ye every one, whoever ye be. But, alack! noble sirs, ye will find him in ill case; for his sickness gaineth on him day by day, and——"

"Sickness, say'st thou?" cried both brothers in dismay. What ails him?"

Ere the man could reply, he started suddenly, straining his eyes past the group as if watching some coming figure, and then threw himself on his face in the dust. The wondering knights turned and saw that he had prostrated himself before an old man in the garb of a monk, whose thrown-back cowl fully revealed his face.

The hair that framed that face had turned snow-white since Alured saw it last, but the face itself still wore the same look of calm and holy sweetness; and the knight knew it as the monk knew him.

"Give me thy blessing, holy father," said he, leaping from his horse; "I little hoped for such good hap as to see Brother Michael once more."

"May God keep thee in all thy ways, my son," replied the pilgrim-monk, laying his thin, trembling hand gently on the knight's bowed head; "and thanks be to Him that the blessing which awaited thee in southern lands hath found thee at last."

"It hath indeed, father, and good cause have I to be thankful for it. But thou art weary; mount my steed, and I will lead him."

"I thank ye, my children," said the old man faintly, as Alured and Hugo lifted him into the saddle, "and if ye go to the camp, I shall be right glad of your aid, for in truth I am weary, and it hath been revealed to me that there is a dying man there who needeth my ministry."

The brothers exchanged looks, and each saw in the other's face the sudden terror that darkened his own.

"Who is this dying man of whom thou speak'st, father?" ask Alured, with a hesitation that told how he dreaded the possible answer.

"I know not, my son; this only do I know, that he hath need of me. Mount before me, and let us on quickly."

But hardly had they gone half a mile, when there was a clatter of hoofs behind them, and a sturdy Breton man-at-arms, evidently returning from a scouting expedition, came dashing up to them.

"What ho! fair sirs," he called out, "have ye seen, I pray, any English soldiers marching this way?"

Hugo had just time to reply that they had not, when the soldier, catching sight of Brother Michael's face, bowed low, and cried joyfully—

"Thank God you are here, father; you will save our Bertrand for us."

"It is for God to save him, my son, not for me," said the monk, the grand calm of whose face was ruffled by a sudden quiver, like the fall of a stone into a deep, still pool. "Doth his sickness, then, continue to gain on him?"

"So sorely, father," said the rough spearman, with a tell-tale tremor in his deep voice, "that—the—physicians—say——"

Here the brave man fairly broke down.

"Let us press on, my sons," cried Michael; "we have no time to lose."

Nor had they, in truth, if they had known all.

The English garrison of the town had stoutly resisted Du Guesclin's attacks, hoping to hold it till they were relieved. But of this there was little hope (the English having now been driven fairly out of the central provinces of France by Du Guesclin and his comrade, De Clisson), and at last the English commandant agreed to surrender if not relieved within six days. But during this interval Bertrand's illness gained on him so rapidly that it was doubtful if he would live to witness the triumph he had won.

The sixth evening was fast fading into night, when Du Guesclin (whose couch had been brought into the open air at his own request) was seen to lift his head as if listening intently, and then he said faintly to those around—

"Raise me up, friends; here cometh one with whom I must speak."

Sure enough, a few moments later (to the amazement of all present) appeared in the distance Alured de Claremont and Brother Michael, the gallant steed that bore them having kept ahead of the rest, despite its double burden. Hugo and the attendants followed, while Alured, leaping down and aiding the monk to dismount, took the dying man's hand, and said in a tone of bitter grief—

"Bertrand du Guesclin! is it thus we meet again?"

"It was time," replied Bertrand, with unconscious pathos; "the toil hath been long and hard, and I would fain rest. Welcome, good Brother Michael; thou wert my best friend when I began life, and meet it is thou shouldst be with me when I leave it. Welcome, noble Sir Hugo; I have lived long enough, since I have lived to see ye two together once more."

"Captain, dost thou talk of dying?" cried the Breton man-at-arms beside Hugo, clenching his hands in desperation. "What is to become of us without thee? The world would be empty wert thou gone! Wilt thou, whom no foe ever matched, let thyself be borne down by a paltry sickness?"

"Good Thomelin," said Bertrand, with a faint smile, "there is a champion named Death, whom none can resist, for he is sent by God. Nor think that all will be nought for this land when I am gone; for I know (though I cannot tell how) that, after my death, God shall raise ye up another and

a greater champion, who shall free the land from its foes, once and for ever. Now, holy father, lend thine ear to what I have to say."

What he said was heard by none but the monk himself; but as Brother Michael laid his thin hand in blessing on the dying warrior's head, the old man's face was lighted up all at once with a smile so bright and joyous, that he seemed already transfigured by the glory which is not of this world. Then his head was seen to droop, and, without a word, he sank forward till his face rested on Bertrand's knee.

They sprang to raise him, but too late; the aged monk was dead!

"He goes before me as my guide," said Du Guesclin, solemnly, "and great honour it is for a sinner like me to pass through the gate of death with the holiest man in France. Sir Alured, give me thy hand once more, and the blessing of a dying man go with thee. Farewell, comrades! love one another, and serve truly our lord the king; and in whatever land ye make war, bear in mind that the servants of the holy church are sacred to you, and see that ye be good and gentle to all women and children, and show great mercy to the poor!"

As the noble words were spoken, the last gleam of sunset faded from the darkening sky, and the sun of that glorious life went down along with it.

Then, amid the gloomy silence that followed,

a trumpet-blast came echoing from the besieged town. Presently a growing stir was apparent in the French camp, and all stood to their arms, supposing the English to be making a sally.

But it was not so. A few moments later the ranked men-at-arms fell back to right and left as if making way for some one, and through the hushed camp came, with drooping banners and down-turned lances, the gallant English commandant and his knights, to give up the keys of the fortress to him against whom even the stubborn valour of England had striven in vain.

But when the brave Englishman saw what had come to pass, he broke from the ranks, and, kneeling by the dead man's side, laid the keys of the town that he had defended so well in the cold hand that would never move again, and said, in a burst of honest, manly sorrow—

"Would to God I lay there in thy stead, noble Du Guesclin! for if England hath gained by thy death, all Christendom hath lost by it. Thou hast done thy work, and gone to thy rest; but thy work shall live after thee, and endure for ever and ever!"

He spoke truly. The work that Bertrand had so well begun was completed by Joan of Arc half a century later; and France's awakened spirit made good her independence once and for ever.

Nor did her great champion lack his reward. Though his native tower has perished stock and stone, though his domains have passed to strangers,

though his very dust was torn from the grave by a senseless mob in the fury of the French Revolution, his name will endure while the world lasts, crowned not only with the fame due to one who gave his life to save his oppressed country from her foes, but with the far higher glory of "the good and gentle knight that cared for the poor."

"English boys owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Henty."—*Athenæum.*

Blackie & Son's Illustrated Story Books

G. A. HENTY

With Clive in India: or, The Beginnings of an Empire. Illustrated. *New Edition.* 3*s.* 6*d.*

At the period of the landing of Clive as a young writer in India the English were traders existing on sufferance of the native princes. At the close of his career they were masters of the greater part of Southern India. The author has given a full and accurate account of the events of that stirring time, and combines with his narrative a tale of daring and adventure.

"Those who know something about India will be the first to thank Mr. Henty for giving them this instructive volume to place in the hands of their children."
—*Academy.*

Condemned as a Nihilist: A Story of Escape from Siberia. Illustrations by WAL PAGET. *New Edition.* 3*s.* 6*d.*

Godfrey Bullen, a young Englishman resident in St. Petersburg, becomes involved in various political plots, resulting in his seizure and exile to Siberia. After an unsuccessful attempt to escape, he gives himself up to the Russian authorities. Eventually he escapes, and reaches home, having safely accomplished a perilous journey which lasts nearly two years.

"His narrative is more interesting than many of the tales with which the public is familiar of escape from Siberia. The escape of the hero and his faithful Tartar from the hostile Samoyedes is quite the high-water mark of the author's achievement."
—*National Observer.*

Under Wellington's Command: A Tale of the Peninsular War. Illustrations by WAL PAGET. *New Edition.* 3*s.* 6*d.*

In this stirring romance Mr. Henty gives us the further adventures of Terence O'Connor, the hero of *With Moore at Corunna.* We are told how, in alliance with a small force of Spanish guerrillas, the gallant regiment of Portuguese levies commanded by Terence keeps the whole of the French army in check at a critical period of the war, rendering invaluable service to the Iron Duke and his handful of British troops.

"An admirable exposition of Mr. Henty's masterly method of combining instruction with amusement."—*World.*

G. A. HENTY

Through Three Campaigns: A Story of Chitral, the Tirah, and Ashanti. Illustrated by WAL PAGET. With 3 Maps. 6*s*.

The hero of this story, the son of an officer, joins the Chitral expedition secretly as a private soldier, but the enormous difficulties which have to be overcome in the course of the march soon call forth his noble qualities, and before the end of the campaign he qualifies for a commission. His subsequent career is a series of brilliant successes. He takes part in the storming of the Dargai heights, is more than once captured by the enemy, and by a heroic sacrifice wins the V.C.

"Every true boy will enjoy this story of plucky adventure."—*Educational News.*

"Gives animation to recent history, and its confident art and abundant spirit will greatly satisfy the intelligent and spirited boy."—*Dundee Advertiser.*

With Kitchener in the Soudan: A Tale of Atbara and Omdurman. With 10 Illustrations by W. RAINEY, R.I., and 3 Maps. 6*s*.

In carrying out various special missions with which he is entrusted the hero displays so much dash and enterprise that he soon attains an exceptionally high rank for his age. In all the operations he takes a distinguished part, and adventure follows so close on adventure that the end of the story is reached all too soon.

"Mr. Henty has collected a vast amount of information about the reconquest of the Soudan, and he succeeds in impressing it upon his reader's mind at the very time when he is interesting him most."—*Literary World.*

With the British Legion: A Story of the Carlist Wars. With 10 Illustrations by WAL PAGET. 6*s*.

The hero joins the British Legion, which was raised by Sir de Lacy Evans to support the cause of Queen Christina and the Infant Queen Isabella, and as soon as he sets foot on Spanish soil his adventures begin. Arthur is one of Mr. Henty's most brilliant heroes, and the tale of his experiences is thrilling and breathless from first to last.

"It is a rattling story told with verve and spirit."—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

The Treasure of the Incas: A Tale of Adventure in Peru. With 8 Illustrations by WAL PAGET, and a Map. 5*s*.

The heroes of this powerful story go to Peru to look for the treasure which the Incas hid when the Spaniards invaded the country. Their task is both arduous and dangerous, but though they are often disappointed, their courage and perseverance are at last amply rewarded.

"The interest never flags for one moment, and the story is told with vigour."—*World.*

G. A. HENTY

With Roberts to Pretoria: A Tale of the South African War. With 12 Illustrations by WILLIAM RAINEY, R.I., and a Map. 6*s.*

The hero takes part in the series of battles that end in the disaster at Magersfontein, is captured and imprisoned in the race-course at Pretoria, but escapes in time to fight at Paardeberg and march with the victorious army to Bloemfontein. He rides with Colonel Mahon's column to the relief of Mafeking, and accomplishes the return journey with such despatch as to be able to join in the triumphant advance to Pretoria.

"In this story of the South African war Mr. Henty proves once more his incontestable pre-eminence as a writer for boys."—*Standard.*

The Young Carthaginian: A Story of the Times of Hannibal. Illustrated. 3*s.* 6*d.* *New Edition.*

Mr. Henty has had the full advantage of much unexhausted, picturesque, and impressive material, and has thus been enabled to form a striking historic background to as exciting a story of adventure as the keenest appetite could wish.

"From first to last nothing stays the interest of the narrative. It bears us along as on a stream, whose current varies in direction, but never loses its force."
—*Saturday Review.*

Through Russian Snows: or, Napoleon's Retreat from Moscow. With 8 page Illustrations by W. H. OVEREND. 5*s.*

Julian Wyatt becomes, quite innocently, mixed up with smugglers, who carry him to France, and hand him over as a prisoner to the French. He subsequently regains his freedom by joining Napoleon's army in the campaign against Russia.

"The hero is altogether a fine character such as boys will delight in, whilst the story of the campaign is very graphically told."—*St. James's Gazette.*

"One of Mr. Henty's best books, which will be hailed with joy by his many eager readers."—*Journal of Education.*

Both Sides the Border: A Tale of Hotspur and Glendower. Illustrations by RALPH PEACOCK. *New Edition.* 3*s.* 6*d.*

A story of the wild border country at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Oswald Foster casts in his lot with the Percys, and becomes esquire to Sir Henry, the gallant Hotspur. In following his fortunes we are introduced to Douglas of Scotland, Owen Glendower, and other notable personages of this stormy period.

"Mr. Henty retains the reader's interest throughout the story, which he tells clearly and vigorously."—*Daily Telegraph.*

G. A. HENTY

At the Point of the Bayonet: A Tale of the Mahratta War.

With 12 Illustrations by WAL PAGET, and 2 Maps. 6*s.*

Harry Lindsay is carried off to the hills and brought up as a Mahratta. At the age of sixteen he becomes an officer in the service of the Mahratta prince at Poona, and afterwards receives a commission in the army of the East India Company. His courage and enterprise are rewarded by quick promotion, and at the end of the war he sails for England, where he succeeds in establishing his right to the family estates.

"A brisk, dashing narrative."—*Bookman.*

Captain Bayley's Heir: A Tale of the Gold Fields of California. Illustrated.

3*s.* 6*d.*

A frank, manly lad and his cousin are rivals in the heirship of a property. The former falls into a trap laid by the latter, and while under a false accusation of theft, leaves England for America. There he joins a small band of hunters, and is successful both as digger and trader. He acquires a small fortune, and at length returns home, rich in valuable experience.

"The portraits of Captain Bayley and the head-master of Westminster School are admirably drawn, and the adventures in California are told with that vigour which is peculiar to Mr. Henty."—*Academy.*

To Herat and Cabul: A Story of the First Afghan War. With 8 full-page Illustrations by C. M. SHELDON, and Map. 5*s.*

The hero takes a distinguished part in the defence of Herat, and subsequently obtains invaluable information for the British army during the first Afghan war. He is fortunately spared the horrors of the retreat from Cabul, and shares in the series of operations by which that most disastrous blunder was retrieved.

"We can heartily commend it to boys, old and young."—*Spectator.*

With Cochrane the Dauntless: A Tale of his Exploits.

With 12 page Illustrations by W. H. MARGETSON. 6*s.*

It would be hard to find, even in sensational fiction, a more daring leader than Lord Cochrane, or a career which supplies so many thrilling exploits. The manner in which, almost single-handed, he scattered the French fleet in the Basque Roads is one of the greatest feats in English naval history.

"As rousing and interesting a book as boys could wish for."—*Saturday Review.*

"This tale we specially recommend."—*St. James's Gazette.*

G. A. HENTY

Redskin and Cow-Boy: A Tale of the Western Plains. With 12 page Illustrations by ALFRED PEARSE. 6*s.*

Hugh Tunstall accompanies a frontiersman on a hunting expedition on the Plains, and then seeks employment as a cow-boy on a cattle ranch. His experiences during a "round up" present in picturesque form the toilsome, exciting, adventurous life of a cow-boy; while the perils of a frontier settlement are vividly set forth. Subsequently, the hero joins a wagon-team, and the interest is sustained in a fight with, and capture of, brigands.

"A strong interest of open-air life and movement pervades the whole book."—*Scotsman.*

With Buller in Natal: or, A Born Leader. With 10 page Illustrations by W. RAINEY, R.I., and a Map. 6*s.*

The heroic story of the relief of Ladysmith forms the theme of one of the most powerful romances that have come from Mr. Henty's pen. When the war breaks out, the hero, Chris King, and his friends band themselves together under the title of the Maritzburg Scouts. From first to last the boy scouts are constantly engaged in perilous and exciting enterprises, from which they always emerge triumphant, thanks to their own skill and courage, and the dash and ingenuity of their leader.

"Just the sort of book to inspire an enterprising boy."—*Army and Navy Gazette.*

By England's Aid: or, The Freeing of the Netherlands (1585–1604). With 10 page Illustrations by ALFRED PEARSE, and 4 Maps. 3*s.* 6*d.*

Two English lads go to Holland in the service of one of "the fighting Veres". After many adventures one of the lads finds himself on board a Spanish ship at the defeat of the Armada, and escapes from Spain only to fall into the hands of the Corsairs. He is successful, however, in getting back to Spain, and regains his native country after the capture of Cadiz.

"Boys know and love Mr. Henty's books of adventure, and will welcome his tale of the freeing of the Netherlands."—*Athenæum.*

The Lion of the North: A Tale of Gustavus Adolphus. Illustrated. 3*s.* 6*d.* *New Edition.*

In this story Mr. Henty gives the history of the first part of the Thirty Years' War, a struggle unprecedented in length, in the fury with which it was carried on, and in the terrible destruction and ruin which it caused. The army of the chivalrous King of Sweden, the prop of the Protestant cause, was largely composed of Scotchmen, and among these was the hero of the story. The chief interest of the tale turns on the great struggle between Gustavus and his chief opponents—Wallenstein, Tilly, and Pappenheim.

"The tale is a clever and instructive piece of history, and as boys may be trusted to read it conscientiously, they can hardly fail to be profited as well as pleased."
—*The Times.*

G. A. HENTY

The Lion of St. Mark: A Tale of Venice. With 6 page Illustrations. Cloth elegant, 3*s.* 6*d.*

A story of Venice at a period when intrigue, crime, and bloodshed were rife. The hero, the son of an English trader, displays a fine manliness, and is successful in extricating his friends from imminent dangers. Finally he contributes to the victories of the Venetians at Porto d'Anzo and Chioggia.

"Every boy should read *The Lion of St. Mark.*"—*Saturday Review.*

– The Dragon and the Raven: or, The Days of King Alfred. With 8 page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. 5*s.*

In this story the author gives an account of the desperate struggle between Saxon and Dane for supremacy in England. The hero, a young Saxon, takes part in all the battles fought by King Alfred, and the incidents in his career are unusually varied and exciting.

"We have nothing but praise for this story, which is excellently written, and will make the history of the period to which it relates a reality to its readers."
—*School Guardian.*

– The Bravest of the Brave: or, With Peterborough in Spain. With 8 page Illustrations by H. M. PAGET. 5*s.*

There are few great leaders whose life and actions have so completely fallen into oblivion as those of the Earl of Peterborough. He showed a genius for warfare which has never been surpassed. Round the fortunes of Jack Stilwell, the hero, and of Peterborough, Mr. Henty has woven a brilliant narrative of the War of the Spanish Succession (1705–6).

"The adventures of the aide-de-camp, Jack, will probably be found to be no less interesting than the marvellous operations of the General himself, in which he takes a leading part."—*Spectator.*

– For Name and Fame: or, To Cabul with Roberts. With 8 page Illustrations. 5*s.*

After being wrecked and going through many stirring adventures among the Malays, the hero of this story finds his way to Calcutta, and enlists in a regiment proceeding to the Afghan Passes. He accompanies the force under General Roberts to the Peiwar Kotal, is wounded, taken prisoner, and carried to Cabul, whence he is transferred to Candahar, and takes part in the final defeat of the army of Ayoub Khan.

"The book teems with spirited scenes and stirring adventures, and the boy who reads it attentively will acquire a sound knowledge on subjects that are of vital importance to our Indian Empire."—*School Guardian.*

G. A. HENTY

– Maori and Settler: A Story of the New Zealand War. With 8 page Illustrations by ALFRED PEARSE. 5*s*.

The Renshaws lose their property and emigrate to New Zealand. Wilfrid, a strong, self-reliant lad, is the mainstay of the household. The odds seem hopelessly against the party, but they succeed in establishing themselves happily in one of the pleasantest of the New Zealand valleys.

"A book which all young people, but especially boys, will read with avidity."
—*Athenæum.*

– Beric the Briton: A Story of the Roman Invasion of Britain. With 12 page Illustrations by W. PARKINSON. 6*s*.

Beric is a boy-chief of a British tribe which takes a prominent part in the insurrection under Boadicea: and after the defeat of that heroic queen he continues the struggle in the fen-country. Ultimately Beric is defeated and carried captive to Rome, where he succeeds in saving a Christian maid by slaying a lion in the arena, and is rewarded by being made the personal protector of Nero. Finally, he escapes and returns to Britain, where he becomes a wise ruler of his own people.

"He is a hero of the most attractive kind. . . . One of the most spirited and well-imagined stories Mr. Henty has written."—*Saturday Review.*

"His conflict with a lion in the arena is a thrilling chapter."
—*School Board Chronicle.*

"Full of every form of heroism and pluck."—*Christian World.*

– The Dash for Khartoum: A Tale of the Nile Expedition. With 10 page Illustrations by JOHN SCHÖNBERG and J. NASH. 6*s*.

In the record of recent British history there is no more captivating page for boys than the story of the Nile campaign, and the attempt to rescue General Gordon. For, in the difficulties which the expedition encountered, and in the perils which it overpassed, are found all the excitement of romance, as well as the fascination which belongs to real events.

"*The Dash for Khartoum* is your ideal boys' book."—*Tablet.*

"It is literally true that the narrative never flags a moment."—*Academy.*

"*The Dash for Khartoum* will be appreciated even by those who don't ordinarily care a dash for anything."—*Punch.*

– With Wolfe in Canada: or, The Winning of a Continent. With 12 page Illustrations by GORDON BROWNE. 6*s*.

Mr. Henty tells the story of the struggle between Britain and France for supremacy on the North American continent. The fall of Quebec decided that the Anglo-Saxon race should predominate in the New World; that Britain, and not France, should take the lead among the nations.

"A moving tale of military exploit and thrilling adventure."—*Daily News.*

G. A. HENTY

Held Fast for England:

A Tale of the Siege of Gibraltar. With 8 page Illustrations by GORDON BROWNE. 5*s*.

The story deals with one of the most memorable sieges in history. The hero, a young Englishman resident in Gibraltar, takes a brave and worthy part in the long defence, and we learn with what bravery, resourcefulness, and tenacity the Rock was held for England.

"There is no cessation of exciting incident throughout the story."—*Athenæum.*

In the Irish Brigade:

A Tale of War in Flanders and Spain. With 12 page Illustrations by CHARLES M. SHELDON. 6*s*.

The hero is a young officer in the Irish Brigade, which for many years after the siege of Limerick formed the backbone of the French army. He goes through many stirring adventures, successfully carries out dangerous missions in Spain, saves a large portion of the French army at Oudenarde, and even has the audacity to kidnap the Prime Minister of England.

"A stirring book of military adventure."—*Scotsman.*

At Agincourt:

A Tale of the White Hoods of Paris. With 12 page Illustrations by WAL PAGET. 6*s*.

Sir Eustace de Villeroy, in journeying from Hampshire to his castle in France, made young Guy Aylmer one of his escort. Soon thereafter the castle was attacked, and the English youth displayed such valour that his liege-lord made him commander of a special mission to Paris. This he accomplished, returning in time to take part in the campaign against the French which ended in the glorious victory for England at Agincourt.

"Cannot fail to commend itself to boys of all ages."—*Manchester Courier.*

A Final Reckoning:

A Tale of Bush Life in Australia. With 8 page Illustrations by W. B. WOLLEN. 5*s*.

The hero, a young Englishman, emigrates to Australia, where he gets employment as an officer in the mounted police. A few years of active work gain him promotion to a captaincy. In that post he greatly distinguishes himself, and finally leaves the service and settles down as a squatter.

"A stirring story capitally told."—*Guardian.*

Blackie & Son's
Story Books for Boys

Capt. F. S. BRERETON

Roger the Bold: A Tale of the Conquest of Mexico. Illustrated by STANLEY L. WOOD. Large crown 8vo, cloth elegant, olivine edges, 6*s*.

Roger is a great fighter. He is put in charge of a wonderful disc, but a certain traitor robs him, and he finally comes as a prisoner to Mexico. The Mexicans think he is a god and offer him all their treasure if he will fight against the Spaniards. The reader will learn with bated breath of the adventures which Roger experiences, of the desperate defence which he organizes, and of his narrow escape before retreat is cut off.

"The tale forms lively reading, the fighting being especially good."—*Athenæum.*

"The author has excelled himself."—*Outlook.*

With Roberts to Candahar: A Tale of the Third Afghan War. Illustrated by W. RAINEY, R.I. Crown 8vo, cloth elegant, olivine edges, 5*s*.

The tale opens at Cabul, when Sir Louis Cavagnari's mission was being attacked by the mutinous troops of the Ameer. Major Dennisson is on a visit to Sir Louis, and, the mission being destroyed, all trace of him is lost. Alec Dennisson is due at Cabul two days later, but he is attacked, and escapes, is appointed aide-de-camp to General Roberts, and joins the punitive expedition. He comes to loggerheads with a certain Yohinda Khan, who has captives in his hands. One of these Alec believes is his father, and he determines to rescue him. His indomitable courage overcomes all difficulties, and his efforts are crowned with success.

"A very tried author, who improves with each book he writes, is Captain F. S. Brereton."—*Academy.*

A Soldier of Japan: A Tale of the Russo-Japanese War. Illustrated. 5*s*.

The opening incident of this war was as great a surprise to Valentine Graham and his father as to the Russians, for their junk lay opposite Port Arthur on February 8, 1904, and in spite of their signals was heavily shelled. They are rescued by the Japanese, and, indignant at their treatment, join the Mikado's forces. Valentine promptly takes part in a second dash upon Port Arthur, and becomes a prisoner. In time he is sent up-country with other prisoners, with whom he contrives to escape. They join a band of Hunhuse brigands, and have a desperate encounter with the Cossacks. A week later they fall in with Kuroki's army and take part in the battle of the Yalu. Thereafter numerous adventures befall the hero, who becomes noted throughout Manchuria for dash and intrepidity.

"The pages bristle with hairbreadth escapes and gallantry, and the historical side of the tale is worked out with much accuracy and detail."—*Graphic.*

Capt. F. S. BRERETON

One of the Fighting Scouts: A Tale of Guerrilla Warfare in South Africa.

Illustrated by STANLEY L. WOOD. With a Map. 5*s*.

This story deals with the guerrilla aspect of the Boer War, and shows how George Ransome is compelled to leave his father's farm and take service with the British. He is given the command of a band of scouts as a reward for gallantry, and with these he punishes certain rebels for a piece of rascality, and successfully attacks Botha's commando. He even outwits the redoubtable De Wet.

"Altogether an unusually good story."—*Yorkshire Post.*

With the Dyaks of Borneo: A Tale of the Head Hunters.

Illustrated by FRITZ BERGEN. Large crown 8vo, 6*s*.

Tyler wins a commission by a gallant act, but on the way to Borneo, there to join his ship, he is set upon by a band of Malay and Dyak pirates. He escapes to land, where he becomes the leader of a tribe of head-hunting Dyaks. They march through the forests towards Sarawak, defeating the pirates *en route*. Afterwards Tyler meets with many adventures, and sees hard fighting ere he is disabled by a wound.

"Young readers must be hard to please if *With the Dyaks* does not suit them."
—*Spectator.*

A Hero of Lucknow: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny.

Illustrated by WILLIAM RAINEY, R.I. Crown 8vo, cloth elegant, 5*s*.

The hero takes part in the defence of Cawnpore, but by good fortune slips away before the capitulation. Soon after he becomes a prisoner of a rebel leader. He is dragged to Lucknow, where he eludes his captors and gains the defences. But his adventures have not ended. Thanks to the knowledge which he has obtained of the city he is able to carry out successfully a hazardous expedition, and eventually reaches Delhi. He takes part in the capture of that city, and then marches to the relief of Lucknow.

"Full of action and picturesque adventure. A splendid book for boys, as Captain Brereton's always are."—*British Weekly.*

Dr. GORDON STABLES, R.N.

To Greenland and the Pole: A Story of the Arctic Regions.

New Edition. 3*s*.

The story deals with skilöbning in the north of Scotland, deer-hunting in Norway, sealing in the Arctic, bear-stalking on the ice, the hardships of a journey across Greenland, and a voyage to the back of the North Pole.

"The adventures are actual experiences. It is one of the books of the season, and one of the best Mr. Stables has ever written."—*Truth.*

ALEXANDER MACDONALD

The Lost Explorers: A Story of the Trackless Desert. Illustrated by ARTHUR H. BUCKLAND. Large crown 8vo, cloth, olivine edges, 6*s*.

This is a fresh and original story by a new writer of the first rank. The heroes dig for gold, and find it too, and meet with some real bush characters; but later they set out on a wild mission into the interior in search of a mysterious mountain, near which Mackay's former party had disappeared. They have many adventures on the way, and ultimately reach the mountain only to be attacked by a band of warriors, who, after inflicting serious loss on the party, retire into the mountain by a secret passage. The expedition force their way into the forbidden land, and there meet with many pleasant surprises. Mr. Macdonald gives his actual experiences in crossing the great Never Never Land. Seldom has such a vividly realistic tale been written for boys.

"As splendid and as vivid a narrative as any boy could wish to read."
—*Daily Graphic.*

HARRY COLLINGWOOD

Across the Spanish Main: A Tale of the Sea in the Days of Queen Bess. Illustrated. Crown 8vo, cloth elegant, olivine edges, 5*s*.

This is a rattling story of the sea in the days of Queen Elizabeth. Two youths sail with Cavendish for the Indies. Their three small ships capture or destroy five Spanish frigates. In this lively encounter one of the friends becomes a prisoner, and before he escapes manages to secure a cipher revealing the hiding-place of the hoard of a notorious pirate. After some exciting adventures in Cuba, one of the heroes is marooned on a lonely island, but is rescued in time to take part in the capture of the pirate. Further adventures follow thick and fast.

"A rattling story, crammed with incident."—*Manchester Courier.*

HERBERT STRANG

Kobo: A Story of the Russo-Japanese War. Illustrated. 5*s*.

Bob Fawcett, sent out to Japan just before the outbreak of the war to test the range-finding apparatus of the Japanese fleet, has the good fortune to do a slight service to Kobo San, the descendant of an ancient Samurai family, and high in the Government service. Bob shares in some of the most noteworthy naval actions of the war. These are, however, only the prelude to as exciting a series of adventures on land as ever boy went through. Bob is captured by Cossacks, escapes, is besieged with Kobo in a Korean temple, and after defeating the besiegers reaches the army of General Kuroki in time for the battle of the Yalu.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* said: "Mr. Herbert Strang, whose splendid story, *Tom Burnaby*, proved so brilliantly successful, has written another that will rank as its equal for vivid interest".

HERBERT STRANG

The Adventures of Harry Rochester:

A Story of the Days of Marlborough and Eugene. Illustrated. 6*s.*

The hero, driven by the death of his father to seek his fortune in London, is kidnapped and carried on board a ship bound for Barbados. Escaping, he takes service with a Dutchman who is contractor to the allied forces in the Low Countries. A daring feat while on convoy duty wins him a commission in a Dutch regiment; he fights at Blenheim and comes into relations with Marlborough and Eugene. The story is packed with adventure; and there is a romantic underplot.

"In *The Adventures of Harry Rochester* Mr. Strang has written one of the best stories of a military and historical type we have seen for many a day."—*Athenæum.*

"The story is full of vigour and movement."—*Literary World.*

– Brown of Moukden:

A Story of the Russo-Japanese War. Illustrated. 5*s.*

In *Kobo,* Mr. Herbert Strang gave a picture of the war from the Japanese side. In the present book he approaches the same great subject from the Russian side. Mr. Brown is the victim of a conspiracy to connect him with the betrayal of certain military secrets to the Japanese; he suddenly disappears, and his son Jack is left friendless in Moukden. Jack's strange adventures when caught up in the whirlpool of the war, and the means by which he ultimately traces his father's whereabouts, are told with the same spirit and intimate knowledge of the East that made the success of *Kobo.*

"Mr. Strang's best-known volume, *Tom Burnaby*, was a real boys' book, and was hailed with delight by every youngster who loves a story full of daring and adventure. But Mr. Strang puts more into his books than exciting incidents well told. His facts and dates, and his descriptions of the manners and customs of the periods with which he deals, have all the merits of complete historical accuracy, so that boys who read Mr. Strang's works have not merely the advantage of perusing enthralling and wholesome tales, but they are, unconsciously it may be, also absorbing sound and trustworthy information of the men and times about which they are reading."—*Daily Telegraph.*

"The incident of the locomotive race down the Siberian Railway is, for breathless interest, the equal of anything we know of in the whole range of juvenile fiction. . . . The book will hold boy readers spell-bound."—*Church Times.*

DAVID KER

Among the Dark Mountains:

or, Cast away in Sumatra.

Illustrated by FRANCES EWAN. Crown 8vo, cloth elegant, 3*s.* 6*d.*

Marmaduke Wyvil sails for Singapore, with his chum Alfred, to bring home the latter's father, Colonel Huntley. Arriving there, they find that nothing has been heard of Huntley, and they go seeking him among the islands. Learning that he is a prisoner among the savages of Acheen, they go thither and treat for his release. The savages plot against them, and they are preparing to sell their lives as dearly as possible when the eruption of Krakatoa breaks out and enables them to escape.

"A glorious tale of adventure."—*Educational News.*

MEREDITH FLETCHER

Every Inch a Briton:

A School Story. Illustrated by SYDNEY COWELL. 3*s.* 6*d.*

This story is written from the point of view of an ordinary boy, who gives an animated account of a young public-schoolboy's life. No moral is drawn; yet the story indicates a kind of training that goes to promote veracity, endurance, and enterprise; and of each of several of the characters it might be truly said, he is worthy to be called, "Every Inch a Briton".

"In *Every Inch a Briton* Mr. Meredith Fletcher has scored a success."
—*Manchester Guardian.*

Jefferson Junior:

A School Story. Illustrated by J. R. BURGESS. Crown 8vo, cloth elegant, 3*s.* 6*d.*

A tale of the adventures and misadventures of a pair of youngsters during their first term at a public school, written by one of them later on. The hero's ingenious efforts to unravel a mystery "set things humming" in rather a startling fashion; but after many blunders and novel experiences all comes right at last.

"A comical yarn. . . . The boy who does not break out into sudden fits of uncontrollable laughter on reading it has no fun in his bones."—*Yorkshire Daily Observer.*

G. MANVILLE FENN

Bunyip Land:

Among the Blackfellows in New Guinea. Illustrated. 3*s.*

The story of an eminent botanist who ventures into the interior of New Guinea in search of new plants. Years pass away, and he does not return. He is supposed to be dead, but his wife and son refuse to believe it; and, as soon as he is old enough, young Joe goes in search of his father, accompanied by Jimmy, a native black. After many adventures they discover the lost one, a prisoner among the blacks, and bring him home in triumph.

"One of the best tales of adventure produced by any living writer."
—*Daily Chronicle.*

Dick o' the Fens:

A Romance of the Great East Swamp. Illustrated by FRANK DADD. Cloth elegant, olivine edges, 3*s.* 6*d.*

A tale of boy life in the old Lincolnshire Fens. Sketches of shooting and fishing experiences are introduced in a manner which should stimulate the faculty of observation, and give a healthy love for country life; while the record of the fenman's stealthy resistance to the great draining scheme is full of the keenest interest.

"We conscientiously believe that boys will find it capital reading."—*Times.*

"We have not of late come across a historical fiction, whether intended for boys or for men, which deserves to be so heartily praised as regards plot, incidents, and spirit. It is its author's masterpiece as yet."—*Spectator.*

FRED SMITH

The World of Animal Life.

Edited by FRED SMITH. Profusely Illustrated with Engravings after F. SPECHT and other eminent artists. 5*s.*

The aim of *The World of Animal Life* is to give in non-scientific language an account of those inhabitants of the land, sea, and sky with whose names we are all familiar, but concerning whose manner of life the majority of us have only the haziest conceptions.

"An admirable volume for the young mind enquiring after Nature."
—*Birmingham Gazette.*

J. CHALMERS

Fighting the Matabele:

A Story of Adventure in Rhodesia. Illustrated by STANLEY L. WOOD. 3*s.*

A story of the great Matabele rising in 1896. The hero and his friends are surprised by the revolted natives in the heart of the Matopo mountains, and after experiencing many stirring adventures eventually make their way back to Buluwayo. The hero subsequently joins the Africander Corps, and distinguishes himself in the operations by which the insurrection is crushed.

"The stormy times of the recent insurrection in Matabeleland are described with a piquantness which will ensure the book becoming a favourite."—*Liverpool Courier.*

A. J. CHURCH

Lords of the World:

A Tale of the Fall of Carthage and Corinth. Illustrated by RALPH PEACOCK. 3*s.* 6*d.*

Cleanor, a young Greek, whose native town has been barbarously destroyed, struggles to resist the growing power of Rome. He sees Carthage and Corinth fall, and at last owns that the Romans are better fitted than any other nation to be Lords of the World.

"As a boy's book, *Lords of the World* deserves a hearty welcome."—*Spectator.*
"An excellent story."—*Daily Chronicle.*

S. BARING-GOULD

Grettir the Outlaw:

A Story of Iceland in the days of the Vikings. With 6 page Illustrations by M. ZENO DIEMER. 3*s.*

A narrative of adventure of the most romantic kind. No boy will be able to withstand the magic of such scenes as the fight of Grettir with the twelve bearserks, the wrestle with Karr the Old in the chamber of the dead, the combat with the spirit of Glam the thrall, and the defence of the dying Grettir by his younger brother.

"Has a freshness, a freedom, a sense of sun and wind and the open air, which make it irresistible."—*National Observer.*

PAUL DANBY

The Red Army Book.

With many Illustrations in colour and in black-and-white. 6*s.*

This book includes chapters on the various branches of the regular army, and also on such attractive subjects as "Boys who have won the V.C.", "Pets of the Regiment", "The Colours", "Famous War Horses", &c. Each chapter, besides dealing generally with its subject, is full of capital anecdotes, and the book as a whole is excellently illustrated with colour and black-and-white illustrations.

"Every boy would glory in the keeping and reading of such a prize."—*Daily Telegraph.*

J. CUTHBERT HADDEN

The Nelson Navy Book.

With many Illustrations in colour and in black-and-white. Large crown 8vo, cloth, olivine edges, 6*s.*

In England's history there is no more stirring story than that of her Navy. Mr. Hadden tells how the foundations of our vast Empire were laid by the spirit of naval adventure and the desire to explore the distant seas; and how Britain came into conflict with Dane and Dutchman, Spaniard and Frenchman, and many more, all of whom she subdued after many a stout fight detailed in these pages. The book is cast in a popular style and is thoroughly up to date.

"A stirring, heartening tale, bold and bracing as the sea itself."—*The Standard.*
"An ideal book for boys."—*Sheffield Telegraph.*

C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE

The Captured Cruiser:

or, Two Years from Land. With 6 page Illustrations by F. BRANGWYN. 3*s.* 6*d.*

The central incidents deal with the capture, during the war between Chili and Peru, of an armed cruiser. The heroes and their companions break from prison in Valparaiso, board this warship in the night, overpower the watch, escape to sea under the fire of the forts, and finally, after marvellous adventures, lose the cruiser among the icebergs near Cape Horn.

"The two lads and the two skippers are admirably drawn. Mr. Hyne has now secured a position in the first rank of writers of fiction for boys."—*Spectator.*

Stimson's Reef:

With 4 page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. 2*s.* 6*d.*

This is the extended log of a cutter which sailed from the Clyde to the Amazon in search of a gold reef. It relates how they discovered the buccaneer's treasure in the Spanish Main, fought the Indians, turned aside the River Jamary by blasting, and so laid bare the gold of *Stimson's Reef.*

"Few stories come within hailing distance of *Stimson's Reef* in startling incidents and hairbreadth 'scapes. It may almost vie with Mr. R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island.*"—*Guardian.*

ROBERT LEIGHTON

Olaf the Glorious:

A Historical Story of the Viking Age. Illustrated. 3*s*.

The story tells of Olaf's romantic youth, his adventures as a viking, and his conversion to Christianity. He returns to pagan Norway, is accepted as king, and converts his people to the Christian faith. The story closes with the great battle of Svold, when Olaf, defeated, jumps overboard, and is last seen with the sunlight shining on the glittering cross upon his shield.

"Is as good as anything of the kind we have met with. Mr. Leighton more than holds his own with Rider Haggard and Baring-Gould."—*Times.*

R. STEAD

Grit will Tell:

The Adventures of a Barge-boy. With 4 Illustrations by D. CARLETON SMYTH. Cloth, 2*s*. 6*d*.

A lad whose name has been lost amidst early buffetings by hard fortune suffers many hardships at the hands of a bargeman, his master, and runs away. The various adventures and experiences with which he meets on the road to success, the bear-hunt in which he takes part, and the battle at which he acts as war-correspondent, form a story of absorbing interest and after a boy's own heart.

"A thoroughly wholesome and attractive book."—*Graphic.*

Will of the Dales:

A Story of the Times of Elizabeth and James. By R. STEAD. Illustrated by J. JELLICOE. 2*s*. 6*d*.

Will, a sturdy and likeable peasant lad, goes up to London to seek his fortune. He has many exciting experiences as the result of his friendship with one of Queen Mary's old soldiers, and his involuntary connection with the luckless "Rising in the North", but he attains at length to wealth, influence, and honours, and becomes the founder of a noble family.

"We are able to recommend this capital boys' book without reservation."
—*Manchester Courier.*

HARRY COLLINGWOOD

The Pirate Island.

With 6 Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND and J. R. WELLS. 3*s*.

By a deed of true gallantry the hero's whole destiny is changed, and, going to sea, he forms one of a party who, after being burned out of their ship in the South Pacific, are picked up by a pirate brig and taken to the "Pirate Island". After many thrilling adventures they ultimately succeed in effecting their escape.

"A capital story of the sea; indeed in our opinion the author is superior in some respects as a marine novelist to the better-known Mr. Clark Russell."—*Times.*

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A 000 127 757 3